

Broccoli Lion

Illustrator: sime

2

The Great Cleric

White-Collar Survival

in Another World

VISIT...

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Chapter 3: A Stone Best Left Unturned

- 01 — OP Equipment and a Full Stomach
- Lumina — The Captain of the Valkyries
- 02 — Saint Weirdo's Day
- 03 — Bearing Fruit in the Third Boss Room
- 04 — Another Audience with the Pope
- 05 — Disaster in the Holy City
- 06 — Struggle Against the Newly-Dubbed Lich Knight
- 07 — Always Cheat on Time Trials
- 08 — The Labyrinth of Trials
- Crisis at the Church — Saint Weirdo Gone Missing
- 09 — A Zombie and His Master
- 10 — Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction
- 11 — The Healer's Proclamation

CONTENTS

- 01 — The Price of a Healer
- 02 — An HQ Healer's Duties
- 03 — The Undead Labyrinth
- 04 — Crossed Wires
- 05 — Positive Mindsets for the Eternally Level One
- 06 — Conceit and the Boss Room Menace
- 07 — A Battle Decided, Papal Negotiations Underway
- 08 — Training with the Paladins
- 09 — Morning Drills with the Valkyries
- 10 — A Series of Unfortunate Nicknames
- 11 — The First Ride and the Anxiety Cure-All
- 12 — The Honorary Valkyrie
- 13 — Business Talks with the Pope
- 14 — Saint Weirdo is Born

Chapter 2: The Labyrinth and the Valkyries

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01 — The Price of a Healer

Five days of carriage and countryside had passed during our journey to the center of the Republic of Saint Shurule. At last, the Holy City of Shurule came into view. Nanaella and those back in Merratoni had told me the trip normally took two, maybe three days. Our trip had taken twice as long, but we had good reason for it. Just after our departure, Bazan had given me a couple of options.

“We can make a break for it through monsters and bandits, and rough it outdoors, or we can take the long way, travel only by day, and stop over at each village. Pick your poison.”

One guess as to which one I chose.

Obviously, we couldn’t avoid *every single* monster, but Team Bazan took care of the ones we did encounter faster than I could process my fear of them.

Truthfully, I’d hoped to do a bit of level-leeching on the way, but good old reality was never on my side. So there I was, still at level one. I could only assume that meant being in the same place as a battle wasn’t enough to earn experience points. At least the Lineage of the White Wolf gave me some good combat examples along the way, though. They were like water, a vortex of cooperation that seemed to draw each enemy down into the depths of its own demise. The adventurers were just that well-coordinated. I made a mental note to keep them in mind if I ever needed security for my future clinic.

Bazan was right to nudge me towards choosing the detour. Having a warm bed and food was a nice luxury. The villages were a far cry from Merratoni, though. To call them “organized” would be a drastic overstatement. There were no healing offices to speak of, not a single clinic to be found, so all it took was a little healing magic to earn us room and board. I would borrow a room of the local mayor’s house, get to work, be subjected to exorbitant amounts of gratitude, and then boom, suddenly there was a banquet going on in my honor.

This scene played out at every village we stopped at. Whether it was right to let them fawn over us or not, I couldn't say, but I was glad to have the power to help others. *That* I was sure of.

My personal alcohol ban remained in effect, and Bazan and his lot were officially on the job, so our hosts made up for our lack of interest in booze with mountains of delicious food. I remembered the intense awkwardness I felt as the townspeople continued to come up during the party and shower me with thanks. Some were downright reverent, but I told them all the same thing with my best business smile.

"You've paid me back well enough with all this amazing food and a soft bed. Consider us even."

At that, they would bow their heads and proceed to thank me yet again. Bazan and the boys got a kick out of seeing me so flustered.

On and on, the pattern repeated at each village along the way. I healed those who needed it with Holy Magic, and they gave us food and beds in return. As a result, we had a smooth journey and made it to our destination with no drama to speak of.

"That's Saint Shurule's Holy City? And that shimmering castle's the Healer's Guild Headquarters?"

The gaudy, crystalline palace didn't help my less-than-stellar impressions of the guild. I could feel myself dreading this new post more and more.

"That's the place," Bazan replied grimly, staring at the building. "Guild HQ. Run by the Church themselves."

Maybe there'd been a time when everyone had peacefully coexisted, but it was clear from his tone that, at present, adventurers and commoners shared my trepidation about the healers' organization.

"By the Church themselves..." I echoed softly. "You know, 'the Republic of Saint Shurule's Holy City of Saint Shurule' is a bit of a mouthful. Why do they use 'Shurule' so much?"

"Quiet, Luciel. That's taboo. The ruler who founded the country, the pope, had his reasons. People don't take kindly to ignorance 'round here," Sekiros

warned.

He was referring to Lord Reinstar, I assumed. I had to be careful or one innocuous slip of the tongue would get me into trouble. *Think I'll take that warning to heart.* Not knowing something that was considered common knowledge in a world where most people were barely literate wouldn't be a good thing...

We approached a gate, where a sentry asked for entry papers. I handed him the writ I had received from the pope.

"My apologies for the delay. If you'll allow me, I'll see you to Church Headquarters in place of these beastmen, Sir Luciel."

"That won't be necessary. We know the way," I replied firmly with a smile. *Eat that, human supremacist.*

We continued onwards into the city.

"You sure, Luciel?" Bazan asked, concerned.

"Sure about what?"

"Never mind."

I hadn't felt the racial biases so much in Merratoni, but I now found myself frustrated by how little I could do against it.

On our way to HQ, I spotted a familiar sight: an Adventurer's Guild.

"Oh, I'm almost out of Substance X."

"Right, you just had that barrel of ten days' worth, yeah? Wanna stock up?" Basura asked.

"I think that's a good idea. And you guys can report in for your job. It works out for everyone."

"Yeah, sure, now what's the real reason?"

"I want you to go with me so I don't get picked on."

He cackled. "You're a funny guy, y'know that? Go on, Bazan, help the poor boy out."

“We’ll wait here,” Sekiros added.

“Fine,” Bazan snapped.

We headed for the guildhall together.

“Have you been to this branch before?”

“Once or twice. The guildmaster here’s a bit of a nutjob in his own way, so I figure you’ll forget this is the Holy City pretty damn fast.”

“I’ll make this my hideout if the Church lets me.”

“Not a bad idea,” he chuckled as he pushed open the doors.

No matter the Adventurer’s Guild branch, it was, apparently, par for the course for every single person in the room to lock eyes with you the moment you stepped inside. Bazan didn’t hesitate. He made straight for the receptionist —er...dining hall?

I followed after him. “It feels exactly the same.” The interior, the layout, almost everything was a perfect copy of Merratoni’s guild.

“The guildmaster here?” Bazan called out.

“Welcome. Can I take your order?” As if purposefully aiming to contradict me, the one difference from Merratoni, a young waitress, greeted us pleasantly. It was well past noon, but several adventurers were still sitting around eating.

“Nah, isn’t the guildmaster usually in the kitchen?”

“Yes, he is. Can I ask who you are?” she asked with a suspicious glare.

“Bazan, with the A-rank party Lineage of the White Wolf. I came to introduce Luciel here to the boss.”

The woman’s expression softened. “I understand. I’ll go get him, if you don’t mind waiting a moment.”

After watching her disappear into the back, Bazan turned to me. “Don’t judge a book by its cover, Luciel. That waitress just now? She could probably put up a better fight than even me.”

“Uh, what?” I gaped. In a world with levels and stats, sure, judging by appearance alone wasn’t wise, but stronger than *Bazan*? An A-ranker? “I’ll

make it a point to stay on her good side.”

“Sound idea.” Bazan smirked as the waitress returned with an elderly and short yet muscular man—the very image of a fantasy dwarf.

“I was wonderin’ who the jackass was. Good ta see ya again, Bazan.”

“Likewise. I’ve got someone you should meet.”

“You? Introducin’ a human? Whadda they call you, kid?”

“Oh, um, Luciel,” I replied. “I’m a healer.”

“A healer? With them muscles?” the stout man retorted dubiously.

“Yes, sir.” I felt those familiar, invisible daggers shooting into me from all around the room.

“Bazan, is this...”

“He’s got a few nicknames,” Bazan explained. “Would it clear things up if I told you he’s from Merratoni?”

“I knew it. He’s Brod’s apprentice, ain’t he?” I nodded and the guildmaster’s eyes relaxed, much to my relief. “Well, I sure as hell hope ya didn’t drag my ass out for a couple of pleasantries.”

“We didn’t. Luciel, I’m headin’ to reception to take care of some things. Do what you need to.”

“Uh, sure. Thanks for the help,” I replied as Bazan left the mess, still smirking to himself.

The guildmaster looked at me expectantly. “So?”

“Right. Let me introduce myself properly. My name is Luciel, adventurer and healer. I came to stock up on a keg of undiluted Substance X.”

The entire mess went deathly silent. The eyes piercing me widened in shock before turning away.

“Um... Could you...repeat that order, please?” asked the waitress, speaking up in place of her boss.

“Of course. I’d like a large keg of undiluted Substance X.”

The guildmaster quickly went into the back, then returned with a mug and clunked it onto the table. “Drink.”

“Is this a test?”

“Sure is. I don’t give the substance ta folks who can’t hold it down.”

I could definitely see someone misusing the stuff, so as much as I wanted to, I didn’t argue. Brod and Gulgar had trained me well.

Down the hatch... In between gulps, I caught whispers from the gallery.

“He’s a freak.”

“His tongue’s straight broken.”

“Is that the Masochist Healer everyone’s been talking about?”

“That’s just an urban legend. And he’s supposed to be in Merratoni.”

They weren’t being very subtle. I finished off the mug, then let out a hearty sigh. “There. Will that be enough?”

“Er, yeah.” The guildmaster was trembling for some reason. “I’ll get that keg for ya.”

“Oh, I’ve always wondered... Substance X is a liquid, so do you know why it’s called a ‘substance’?”

“B-Beats me,” he stammered. “Anyway, ya got anything ta fill up?”

“I have a small barrel, but it’s still got a bit left in it. Can you provide a new one?”

“Sure, but it’ll cost ya time ’n money. A silver per keg, about.”

“In that case, I’ll just ask you to refill what I have for now. And here’s three silver in advance for a few more.” I pulled a barrel of Substance X from my magic satchel.

“Sure... Sure thing, pal...” The muscular man picked it up and took it into the back.

“Did you see that? He bought *three barrels* of that crap!”

“He’s a freak.”

“More like a demon.”

“Even demons wouldn’t go near that stuff. It reeks like hell!”

“I hear it’s the best monster-repellent there is, but if you waste too much, you’ll wake up with a mouthful of it.”

What is this, campfire horror story time?

“What kinda life do you gotta live to be able to keep that shit down?”

“Probably a sad one.”

The adventurers, who, at a glance, looked absurdly strong and even more well-equipped than the Merratoni group, didn’t bother to keep their voices down. One wrong look and they’d be all over me. I just knew it.

Please help me, Bazan. I’m scared...

“Here’s your...stuff.” The guildmaster came back with a sour look on his face.

“Thank you. When it runs out, I’ll be back for more if you can have those three kegs ready.”

“Will do.”

I stashed the newly filled barrel in my satchel then made my way to the door. Carefully.

“Wait, healer,” the guildmaster called out. “It true what they say? You’ll heal for a single silver?”

I turned around. “The people at the Merratoni guild were good to me. If you treat me the same, I’ll think about returning the favor.”

I left the dining hall, met up with Bazan, and made it back out unscathed.

“This place definitely isn’t Merratoni. It feels like everyone’s out to get me.”

“You owe the Whirlwind, ya know. He made sure no one was allowed to give you shit. Else they’d catch shit themselves.”

“I...had no idea.”

It seemed like every day I learned about something new that I owed my

master for. I had to make it up to him. And to do that, I had to work hard and make it out of this city as soon as possible.

Bazan and his pals took me straight to the front door of Church Headquarters. “Guys, thank you for everything these past few days,” I said with a bow.

“Hey, just doin’ our jobs. Like we wouldn’t protect the guy we owe our lives to. Ain’t that right?” Basura looked at the others.

“That’s right. If you hadn’t been there for me ’n Sekiros, we’d’ve been in real trouble. Good thing too.” Bazan gave a fierce smile. “Basura can’t do jack by himself.”

“It’s true,” Sekiros agreed. “You damn sure saved us.”

“Please, it was nothing. But honestly, talking like this really drives it home for me. I’m going to be surrounded by strangers here. It’ll be lonely.” It felt like the first day after being transferred to a new office.

“We’ll be waitin’ for you back in Merratoni. You focus on hangin’ in there and making sure you work for all those spell books you got for free.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you again.”

“We’ll all have a drink next time we meet.”

I sincerely hoped that we would. Not even Brod and I had shared a beer yet. “I’ll look forward to it. It’ll be my treat.”

“Sounds good.”

“Don’t you wind up like Bottaculli, you hear?”

“Believe me, I won’t.”



We said our goodbyes and they headed off back to Merratoni.

“It’s gonna be hard starting over in a new city.”

But it was probably too early to be getting sentimental.

Right... These spellbooks. Like Basura said, I’d gotten them for free and they were likely worth a small fortune. They wouldn’t be cheap to replace, so I had to treat them carefully.

I rested a hand on my magic satchel and thought back on my recent journey. I had received seven grimoires from the Merratoni Healer’s Guild. I’d skimmed through them all and had already memorized the chants for each spell. Once, while practicing them on the road, Bazan had snapped and told me to quit the constant mumbling.

“You sound like a damn looney. If you’re gonna do that, at least speak up,” he’d said.

At the time, it had made me flinch. But now, I could look back on the incident and smile. Still, some guy standing in front of Church headquarters with a weird look on his face wasn’t going to make a great impression, so I pulled myself together and got a move on.

Wonder if I’ll get the chance to try out these new spells soon.

Enchantment Holy Magic, Aura Coat: a protective veil that insulated the user from miasma, slowed disease, and protected against status debuffs. Nine MP.

Special Cleansing Holy Magic, Purification: used for expunging curses and impurities. Tough on stains too. Sixteen MP.

Advanced Healing Magic, High Heal: ten times the effectiveness of standard Heal, at the cost of fifteen MP.

Intermediate Area-Healing Magic, Area Middle Heal: a heightened form of standard Area Heal with the same range of effect and three times the potency. Thirty MP.

Advanced Area-Healing Magic, Area High Heal: an even further heightened level of Area Heal with an expanded radius of three meters, but at the steep

price of seventy-five MP.

Status Healing Magic, Recover: relieved the effects of poison, paralysis, charm, sleep, silence, and magically induced enfeeblement, but not petrification, illusion, or disease. Eighteen MP.

Special Recovery Holy Magic, Dispel: nullified the effects of petrification, curses, and illusions. Supposedly boasts additional effects as well. Fifty MP.

Neither Area High Heal nor Dispel were well documented in their respective texts, and my Holy Magic level was too low to try them out. That didn't stop me from memorizing their respective chants, of course, so all I needed was the right skill experience. But I couldn't use them willy-nilly. Compared to a regular old Heal, these spells were a serious drain on magic to cast and I hoped to God (whoever he or she was) that I wouldn't have to use them.

Speaking of things I had to do, what did working at Church headquarters actually entail?

"Is this the kind of ignorance Sekiros was warning me about? Is it normal not to know what a healer does at HQ? Guess there's no point worrying about it now." I took a deep breath and walked towards the towering glass palace of white.

The inside wasn't nearly as intimidating as the architecture suggested, and everyone there was human, which was, if I was to be honest, less nerve-wracking than being surrounded by beastpeople. Each step on the marble floor echoed throughout the enormous hall.

At the very center was my destination: the reception desk. Both receptionists stood when they saw me.

"Welcome to the Healer's Guild Headquarters," one of them said in greeting once I was close enough. "How can we help you?"

"Hi, I'm Luciel. I was a healer at the Merratoni branch, but was recently transferred here by order of the pope. Could I speak with your superior?"

"One moment, please."

The receptionist sat back down, took out a crystal ball, and closed her eyes. I'd heard a lot about these magical items, but never had a chance to see any back in Merratoni. As my curiosity grew, the receptionist began speaking to the object.

"Maybe it's a support item of some kind that lets you communicate telepathically," I muttered to myself.

"That's right. You're well-informed, sir," the other receptionist affirmed, having overheard me.

"Oh, no," I replied once I'd recovered from my slight surprise. "I don't know anything about how it works. I just saw something like it at an Adventurer's Guild."

"An...Adventurer's Guild?"

Yeah, no surprise there. Adventurers and healers don't mix, do they?

The receptionist with the crystal ball finally turned back to me. "Mister Granhart is here for you."

I turned around to find a towering man the size of an adventurer, dressed in a flowing, white robe, walking straight towards me. He looked about forty. But how had he appeared behind me? The only thing back that way was the front door. Had he been outside?

"You are the healer they call Luciel?" he asked. "I am Granhart, a priest at this church and the one who summoned you. Follow me."

Leaving me no time to respond, he strode to the wall behind the reception desk and placed his hand on it. For a split second, I wondered what in the world he could possibly be doing, then the stone split open, revealing a contraption that looked like some sort of elevator.

"Enter."

I did as I was told. For the first time in two years, I felt that familiar tingling in my gut as we ascended.

"How does this work? I've never ridden in one of these before," I said with a pep in my voice. Better to act like an excited kid than an ignorant fool.

“This is a magic elevator. One controls its speed and direction with their own magical energy.”

“Wow! A magic elevator? I didn’t see any other doors down there. Is this the only way in?”

“It is. The building was built this way explicitly to prevent the rabble and intruders from coming and going as they please.”

“Wow, interesting.”

Something tells me it’s to keep people from leaving too, I thought, my longing to return home increasing. I had to get back to Merratoni.

The elevator came to a stop. Granhart stepped off first and continued down the hall without waiting for me. I didn’t stand around to see if he would simply leave me behind.

The corridor was more than wide enough to fit five people shoulder-to-shoulder, and although the decor wasn’t excessively gaudy, the walls and floor glistened with a regal shine that Merratoni’s Adventurer’s Guild, or even the Healer’s Guild, could never hope to match.

“Oh? You are the one I guided to the Healer’s Guild in Merratoni, are you not? I believe your name was...Louise?”

I heard a woman’s voice address me (incorrectly). Turning, I saw a familiar face. “It’s been a long time, Miss Lumina. I never got the chance to thank you back then.”

“I did nothing to warrant it. Tell me, Louise, how have you been?”

She’d completely forgotten my name. I couldn’t blame her, considering we had only met briefly a long time before. I noticed that she was in full armor.

“I think reintroductions are in order. My name is Luciel. And I have to say, I’m impressed that you recognized me. Everyone says I’ve grown quite a bit.”

“Indeed you have, Luciel, but I could never forget such a vibrant magical pulse.”

Magical what now? Is that some sort of skill she has? Or is she, like, electromagnetic? “Well, I’m flattered that you remember me.”

“I have something I would like to discuss with you, but I know you have only just arrived. Please stop by my quarters when you can spare a moment.”

“As long as you don’t mind me intruding.”

“Not at all. Forgive me for interrupting, Granhart.”

“You are within your rights as captain of the Valkyries. There is nothing to forgive,” Granhart replied with a hint of hesitation.

“Very well. Please have someone escort him to me when you two are finished.”

The priest’s expression stiffened. “As you wish.”

“I will be waiting, Luciel.”

And with that, she left.

Granhart and I walked in complete silence until we reached a room that had no business being inside of a church. It was distinctly dimmer than anywhere I had been so far, with whips and saws of unknown purpose strewn about. It wasn’t hard to guess that this was a room for torture. I was also aware that Lumina had probably saved my hide—Granhart couldn’t try anything if she was expecting me. What I didn’t understand was why he had brought me here in the first place. Bottaculli’s scheming came to mind. But I wouldn’t get anywhere without answers, so I mustered up what little courage I had and croaked out what I could.

“This place looks like a torture chamber. Do you mind me asking why you brought me here?” I didn’t try to hide my displeasure.

“This is just a storage room,” he answered quickly, as if he’d been expecting the question. “We’re merely taking a shortcut.”

The very next room was something straight out of a TV show... The kind of place you would see investigators take suspects for interrogation. Given my exchange with Miss Lumina, I felt safe enough to follow him in.

“Have a seat,” he ordered. He took the chair opposite me and pulled out a letter. “I received this from the Merratoni branch Healer’s Guild and its

contents shocked me. Evidently, you have been harming others' profits with your healing, including the Merratoni guild itself. At least, that's what was written here, but what I want is the truth."

The truth, huh? I get it now. I might just make it out alive.

I closed my eyes. Two years ago, I'd been a businessman. Two years ago, I'd been on the verge of a massive promotion. I knew exactly how to flip a negotiation, and I knew the last things that any businessman wanted to hear. All I had to do was find the right words.

I opened my eyes. "You've already read the truth."

"You admit your crime?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"My crime? Two years ago, I became a healer. After that, I joined the Adventurer's Guild and used my healing as payment in exchange for training. Does that constitute a crime?"

"I suppose it does not."

"I couldn't use anything but Heal at the time, but they gave me food, a bed, even clothing and a salary. Does *that* constitute a crime?"

"No, it doesn't."

"For my whole first year there, that's how things were. For my second year, I was formally employed by the guild as a dispatched healer. I learned new spells and my Holy Magic skill increased considerably. Have I broken any rules so far?"

"No, you...acted as a healer should."

I was getting to him. "They treated me well during my first year and even better my second. I'm incredibly grateful to the Adventurer's Guild for that."

"You've made your point. I understand now that the issue does not lie in your conduct. However, the matter of your pricing—how little you charge, that is—still remains."

"Granhart, sir, what do you think about the current state of affairs? Personally, I see nothing wrong with being compensated for using your magic to heal people. Of course it's only fair that people be paid for their work."

“Naturally. Healing is a profession.”

“I won’t ask who the sender of that letter was, but there’s a certain clinic in Merratoni that I’ve heard rumors about. A clinic that uses High Heal for injuries that need nothing more than a Middle Heal or even less. They charge exorbitant rates *after the fact*, then throw their patients into debt slavery when they can’t pay. Don’t you find that deplorable? Is that not the *real* issue here? Wouldn’t making prices more transparent make things easier for both the healers *and* their patients? It’s such an obvious solution, I have to wonder what the Healer’s Guild is really doing.”

“You have some nerve to take that tone with the Church!”

“Please don’t change the subject. I certainly don’t mean to offend; I’m genuinely asking what you think. Is my ignorance, my lack of understanding of how a healer ought to behave, not the fault of the guild’s lack of leadership?”

“You mean to question the role of the guild?”

“That’s right. I’ve read that when it was first founded, healers and patients alike were noble and benevolent, and the healers weren’t compensated with money; rather, they were freely given gifts in gratitude for their services. But things change over time, and this trade is no exception. Again, I don’t think the issue here is healers being paid monetarily.”

Granhart crossed his arms and shut his eyes. “Continue.”

“Getting to the main point, the question is, how much is magic worth? One copper? A silver? Gold? *Platinum*? People don’t all value money in the same way. It changes from person to person. And without the guild setting down guidelines, it’s up to individuals with different views on pricing and varying business skills to make that call. Are you with me so far?” Essentially, I was suggesting that without a system in place, prices could literally be anything.

“You’re saying we should apply a range of fees to different kinds of magic?”

“Not quite. A single Heal from someone who’s just learned it and a Heal from a veteran aren’t of the same value. The veteran would understandably charge more for better results.”

“I fail to understand what it is you’re looking for. Be concise.”

“I’m saying that the source of the problem outlined in that letter is the guild’s ambiguous rules on pricing.”

“I follow.”

“A healer needs to examine the severity of a wound and state the cost of treatment accordingly. *Beforehand*. That is, with the exception of emergency cases where that just isn’t possible.”

“Of course.”

“Healers work under the Church of Saint Shurule. They pay dues, are given permission to practice Holy Magic, and then they go out and do it. The guild facilitates this by selling grimoires, but do they do this for profit? Of course not, right?”

“Obviously. The funds are used for the benefit of young healers and to offset expenses.”

“Then do you see what I’m getting at? If the guild would set guidelines for pricing, patients would know exactly what they’re getting into ahead of time, and healing would become an honest, respected occupation again.” Especially seeing as the concept of insurance didn’t exist in this world.

“I see your point of view, but surely that’s all it is. A single opinion.”

Okay, mister stubborn. “All right, let me give you an example. Say you went out to eat at a place that didn’t list their prices. Based on the amount you ordered, the quality, the cost of the ingredients, you estimate it to be worth around ten copper, but you’re charged ten *gold* instead. What would you do?”

“I would lodge a complaint, naturally.”

“And if they tell you they use only the highest quality ingredients and threaten to sell you into slavery if you can’t immediately pay your debt? If you were even one coin short, you would be enslaved. How would that make you feel?”

“Disgusted. What gives them the...”

“Exactly,” I interjected. “What gives them the right? The entire situation could have been avoided had you only known the prices beforehand. That goes for

any place of business.” Granhart was silent, so I continued. “With all due respect, I think this is the reality of clinics today. I can count on one hand the number of places that show their pricing before providing treatment.”

“Explain to me how this ‘transparent pricing’ would change things.” His tone this time wasn’t accusatory, but one of genuine curiosity. I sensed an open-mindedness from him, as if he would sincerely take my next words into consideration.

“If people knew precisely what their treatment would cost in advance, I think more of them would start going to the clinics.”

“And your basis for that is?”

“As things stand, going to a clinic is like gambling. You never know how much you’ll end up in the hole for, or what will happen if you can’t pay, and people simply don’t want to take that risk. But if they *did* know what they would be charged...”

“They would feel more at ease and therefore more inclined to visit?”

“Exactly. And some healers, as I said, will use higher-level magic for cases that don’t actually require it, for the sole purpose of hiking their rates. So I think the type of spell the healer will use should be made clear as well.”

“You’ve certainly thought this through.”

“I’m just working off this idea of transparency based on what I’ve seen. No one goes into debt because they want to. And I think it goes without saying that no one wants to be enslaved.”

“There may be some merit to your way of thinking.”

I was grateful to see him take my ideas to heart. Now I had to seal the deal with an anecdote. “When I was healing at the Adventurer’s Guild before coming here, I got about fifty patients a day on average. I think the reason for that was because they knew exactly what they would be paying: one silver.”

“So, you speak from experience.” He leaned back in his chair, arms still crossed. “I will admit, you’re an admirable healer.”

“There’s something else that’s been on my mind, if you don’t mind me

asking.”

“I do not.”

“Both the Church and Healer’s Guild run on dues and grimoire sales, right?”

“Those and donations, yes.”

That made me pause. The idea reeked of bribery and hush money. I didn’t want to jump to conclusions or start doubting every little thing, but with an organization as corrupt as this, I couldn’t help being skeptical. It would be less of a problem if the donations were being made publicly, even if that didn’t prevent the possibility of backroom deals or kickbacks.

I thought it over for a moment then got serious. “From what I hear, it’s legal in other countries to enslave people for their debts. Now, let’s say, hypothetically, there was a corrupt clinic with connections to slavers from those countries. They could charge extreme prices, sell their patients off, and make out with a significant profit. Such dealings would be a clear disgrace to the Church of Saint Shurule.”

“Hm, you say there is more to this than meets the eye. But surely this isn’t conjecture. Do you have proof?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t.”

“Then it is mere speculation.”

“It’s more than that. There are things happening that headquarters doesn’t see, but the people and adventurers do. Healers are hated for a reason.” Okay, perhaps I went a bit too far there, but nothing I’d said was a lie.

“I see. I will confer with my fellow priests and discuss this with the archbishops,” Granhart relented with a look of exhaustion.

“Thank you for hearing me out. Now, what should I do next? I take it I can’t go back to Merratoni any time soon.” *Fat chance.*

“You assume correctly. For now, I will call someone to take you to Lumina’s quarters.”

With Granhart looking rather worn out, we stepped out of the room together and found an attendant waiting in the hall. After casting a brief look of concern

at the priest's haggard face, the guide escorted me onwards to Lumina's room.

02 — An HQ Healer's Duties

We passed through a long hallway, into a new building, and up a flight of stairs before finally stopping in front of a room.

"This is Lady Lumina's chambers. If you will excuse me."

"Thank you for showing me the way."

I looked at the door before me and took a deep breath. Could you really blame me for being nervous? Context, shmcontext, going into a girl's room was a scary thing, no matter where you were.

Once I'd sufficiently calmed myself, I knocked. "Miss Lumina, it's Luciel. You wanted to see me?"

"You may enter," I heard from the other side.

I opened the door and was met with an exceptionally plain sight. The bareness of her room shocked me for a moment, but I knew now that the torture-slash-interrogation chamber was just a fun little pastime of Granhart's rather than his private quarters, which was a relief. Although if that *had* been his room...well.

"Is something the matter?" Lumina asked with a puzzled expression.

"Oh, I was just a bit shocked by the gap between your quarters and Granhart's," I laughed, shrugging.

"I see," she giggled. "I suppose anyone would be taken aback by the comparison."

"Do you...know why I'm here at Church HQ?"

"Indeed, to some extent. I hope I helped in keeping Granhart's tirade brief."

"You did, actually. And you helped me back in Merratoni too."

"I have had my fill of your gratitude. And I'm not one for stiff formalities, so please, be at ease."

I think you're the one being formal here... That was a captain of a paladin

regiment for you. “If you insist. By the way—”

Lumina interrupted me with a raised hand. “First, tea. Have a seat over there.”

“Oh, okay. Thank you.”

Her room was an impressive size, like a particularly spacious studio apartment, although painfully dull, to be honest.

“Drab, isn’t it?” Lumina commented, almost as if having read my thoughts. She had returned with the tea faster than I’d expected.

“Oh, no, I don’t think...”

“You won’t offend me. The only use I find for this space is a desk for paperwork and a bed for rest. I have little affection for it,” she confessed, a hint of strain in her tone.

“It took me a whole week to learn Heal after you guided me to the guild. I wanted to thank you for everything, but I’d heard that you’d gone back to headquarters by then.”

“I find myself traveling often due to my work. Pardon the change of subject, but was it Granhart himself who invited you here? Or was it a simple guild transfer?”

“I actually got a letter from the pope ordering my relocation.”

“From Pope Fluna? You must be exceptionally talented.”

“I’m not so sure that’s it. You see...” I gave her a rundown of what had happened in Merratoni, then recounted my conversation with Granhart.

“These are interesting circumstances you’ve found yourself in.” She regarded me for a moment. “Are you aware of the details of your post yet?”

“Um, well, the truth is, I don’t have a clue what I’m doing here.”

“Did Granhart not explain?”

“No. I’m completely in the dark.”

“In that case... Luciel, your duty may be a dangerous one.”

“Seriously?”

“Indeed. You might one day escape it, but until then, you may be at risk.”

“You know, I just got this urge to do some traveling, sharpen my magic skills a little. Do you know anywhere that could use some holy magic? Preferably somewhere without the whole danger thing.”

“I’m afraid you can not escape it, Luciel. Do you know the Purification spell?”

“Yes, I can use it just fine.”

“That is good to hear. If you move up a few levels, you may be able to rise to the rank of priest.”

“As long as I’m not getting slashed, stabbed, or thrown constantly and at random, I think I’ll manage.”

“I struggle to imagine a worse hell, but at any rate, there is something you would do well to know. Beneath an old annex of this church, there is a tomb wherein Saint Shurule’s founders are enshrined. And some decades ago, it became a labyrinth.”

“A labyrinth?”

“Indeed. A maze of—”

“A maze of monsters and treasures, born out of the accumulation of hatred and desire in magically sensitive areas. An adventurer’s dream come true.”

“I’m surprised. I thought you were an ignoramus.”

“Two years is a lot of time for things to change. I did my studying. Do you know that all villages actually have names?” I thought of Nanaella and the others and felt gratitude towards them.

Lumina cackled. “I’d nearly forgotten about that. Returning to the topic at hand, the Church has taken measures to prevent monsters from emerging by sending sentries to thin their numbers. I believe that will be your new post.”

“Out of curiosity, uh, what kinds of monsters are we talking about?”

“Skeletons, zombies, ghosts, and the like. I hear only the undead appear there.”

“Undead? Do I even stand a chance against them?” I wasn’t feeling terribly confident.

“Rumors say that Purification magic can exterminate them instantly. And you will find a use for the magical stones they leave behind. It is not an entirely fruitless job, but few have the desire to take it.”

If it was such easy and profitable work, why did they need to call me out here? I had to assume there was a reason no one else wanted to do it. It was clearly a dangerous task. “I’m not so sure about this.”

“Do not worry. Most healers lack the training that you possess, and the majority of those employed here, as much as it frustrates me to admit, achieved their positions through wealth rather than skill. I would doubt their chances at success, but I hear you have a good deal of combat experience, Luciel.”

People had heard about me here? I trusted Lumina, so I took her word for it.

“You mentioned earlier that this job wasn’t fruitless. What exactly are the benefits?”

“Whatever you find in the dungeon is your own and the magical stones can be traded in. You are free to take what you please. No one will confiscate them.”

“It’s starting to sound like a convenient place to get stronger.” If undead could be wiped out by a single cast of Purification, I might actually be able to level up. My motivation was returning.

“With some luck, you may even discover treasure down there. And you can use the magical stones to purchase advanced grimoires that are exclusive to Guild Headquarters.”

“Quick question,” I interjected, “will I turn into a zombie if one bites me?”

“Where did you hear such nonsense? They may be venomous, but I’ve yet to hear of someone suddenly becoming a monster.”

“That’s a huge relief.”

“On the other hand, the labyrinth is horribly rancid. Utterly foul. Prepare for others to avoid you if the stench seeps into your clothing.”

“Oh, is that all? That shouldn’t be a problem.” It was nothing I hadn’t regularly

experienced with Substance X. Brod would always gag during our training sessions before vanishing and smacking me across the room. Oops, my pesky eyes were leaking again...

“Luciel, are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” This could actually turn out to be the chance of a lifetime for me.

“In any case, it will ultimately be for Granhart to decide.”

“Right.”

“Oh, I’ve lost track of the time. My apologies, but I ought to see you off.”

“It’s okay, I’ve bothered you long enough.”

“You did no such thing. Is someone there?” she called towards the door.

A few seconds later, a reply came. “How can I be of assistance?”

“See Luciel to Granhart, if you please.”

“Understood. This way, please.”

“Thank you for the tea.” I stood up. “Oh, there was one thing I wanted to ask.”

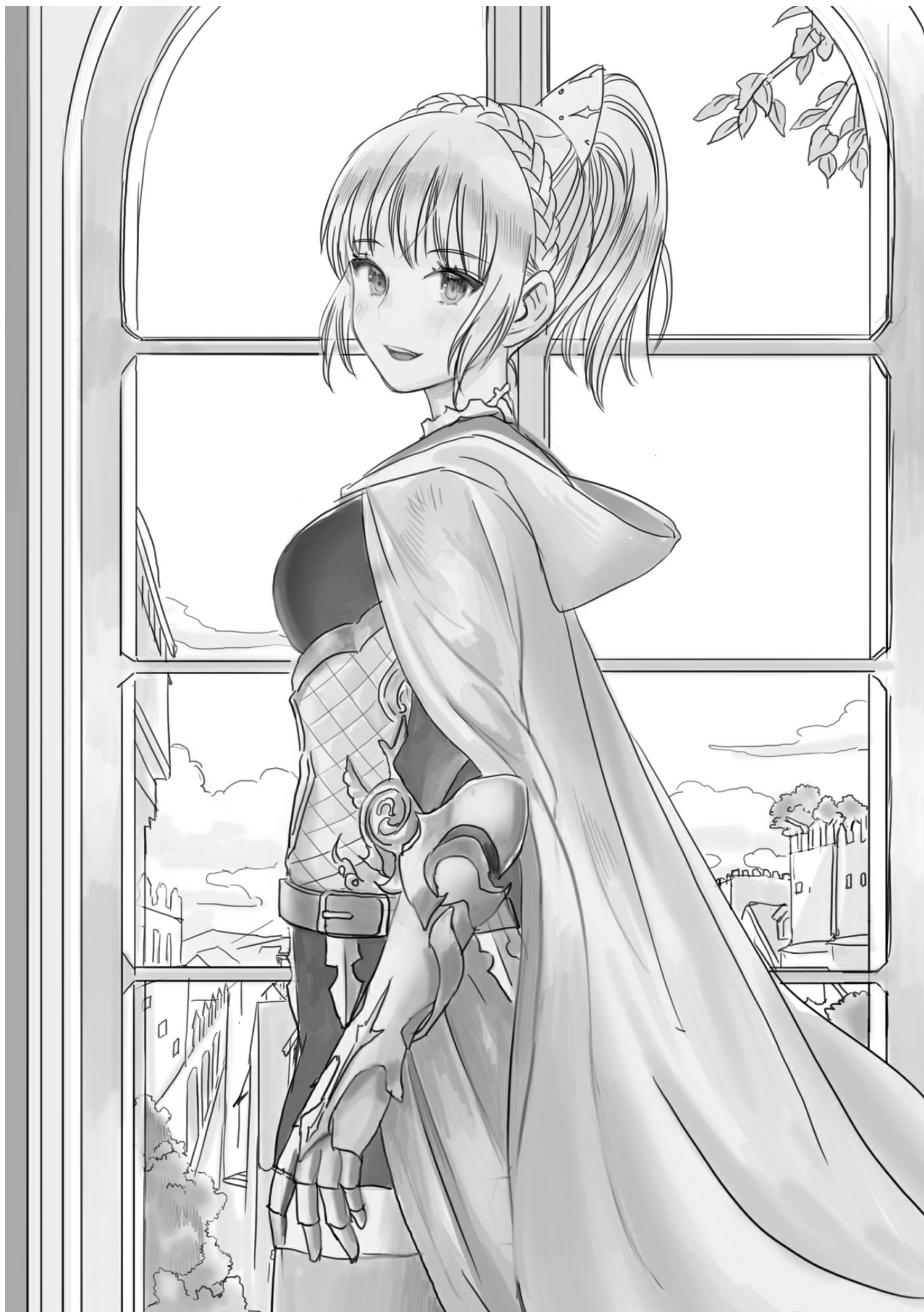
“I will answer if I am able to.”

“I heard you’re the captain of a paladin regiment. Is that true?”

“It seems I’ve been exposed.”

“I think it sounds cool.”

“I suppose it does,” she chuckled.



“I’ll visit again when I have a chance.”

“Please do.”

And with that, our reunion came to an end.

Before we had gone more than a few steps, the attendant stopped and turned to me. “Who are you, exactly?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Lady Lumina never laughs like that. She never spends that long chatting with anyone.”

“She doesn’t? Well, I guess you could say I’m something of a lost puppy she’s picked up.”

“A what?”

“Two years ago, I became a healer and left my hometown without any identification whatsoever. I came to Merratoni, but they wouldn’t let me in, and that’s when Miss Lumina found me and took me to the Healer’s Guild.”

“A lost puppy... You’re seventeen, correct?”

“That’s right. Still a rookie. That’s why she invited me over. I’ve only just been transferred here.”

“I see now. I’m Lucy, by the way. You could say that I’m an attendant of Lady Lumina’s.”

“Luciel. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Feel free to let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you; I appreciate it.”

“So, what brings you to headquarters?”

We discussed my transfer—at least, what I felt I could say about it—on our way to Granhart’s room. Just as she was complimenting me on my Holy Magic skill level, we arrived.

“These are Granhart’s quarters. I’ll leave you to it.”

“Thanks again, Lucy.”

“No problem. Let’s chat sometime soon,” she replied, then headed back to Lumina’s room.

I knocked on the door. “It’s Luciel.”

“Oh, yes, enter.”

“Oh, yes”? Did he already forget about me?

“Excuse me.” The door creaked open when I pushed on it, and inside sat Granhart, pale and nearly hidden behind stacks of paperwork. “Thank you for giving me the time to meet with Miss Lumina. We’ve just finished.”

“Good. These are your orders. Read them and I will have you escorted to your own quarters.”

By order of the Church,

The healer known as Luciel is to be assigned to the Exorcist Combat Unit of the Church of Saint Shurule Healer’s Guild Headquarters. In consideration of his standing as an A-rank healer, he is to be accorded the titles of both “exorcist” and “deacon,” as well as their respective rights and privileges.

“What does this mean?” I asked.

“Starting tomorrow, you will be tasked with the exorcism of the undead. You will be compensated with twenty gold pieces per month.”

“Twenty gold?!” In yen, that was about twenty million! Did I die and go to heaven? Wait, but if I was being salaried, I had to be allowed to use that money somewhere, meaning they might let me leave.

“Correct. Rest well tonight. Tomorrow, your predecessor passes the torch to you. Ah, and I will have you shown to the dining hall as well.”

“I’d appreciate that. If I have time outside of work, are there any training facilities I can use?”

“I will have someone see you to the dining hall and your room. Nothing

more.” He looked disgruntled by my request.

Still, there was more freedom here than I’d expected. What if this job wasn’t going to be all that bad? Or...what if they *wanted* me to get comfy?

I went back and forth in my head as Granhart’s attendant showed me where the dining hall and my own quarters were. The room was essentially a carbon copy of Granhart’s and Lumina’s chambers.

I got to work unpacking my belongings, then passed the time for a while by working out until I got hungry enough to swing by the dining hall. The waiters seemed more than a little shocked by the hearty appetite that Gulgar had forced me to grow accustomed to.

Good thing the food here’s free too, I thought to myself with a wry smile.

Afterwards, I returned to my room and took out my barrel of Substance X along with the special mug that Gulgar had given me, quickly downing my dose for the night. Then I practiced Magic Control and Magic Handling for a bit before hitting the hay.

03 — The Undead Labyrinth

I woke up at my usual early hour the next morning.

“Guess I’m officially an early bird now. But man...”

I should have been feeling relaxed, not having to train with my master anymore, but I was feeling more antsy than ever and had no idea why. I heaved a sigh and weaved my way through the maze of corridors towards the dining hall. It was still early enough to barely be light out, so I figured there would still be night shift workers around.

On the way, I bumped into one of the waitresses who had served me dinner the day before. “You’re that new healer with the big appetite,” she noted. “What’re you doing up and about so early?”

“Good morning. I’m sorry for making all that extra work for you and your coworkers. I’m Luciel, by the way. I think we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

“Goodness, aren’t you polite! You’re perfectly fine, dear. You eat as much as you want. I know you HQ healers have it rough.”

That wasn’t very reassuring. “I’ll try to hang in there,” I laughed. “Is the dining hall open now? If not, when do they serve breakfast?”

“You’ve got about two hours to go. The priests here love to sleep in.”

“They do, huh? Are there any training grounds around here?”

“Sure are, but different regiments use different facilities. I would ask someone higher up about that.”

“Oh, okay, I’ll do that. One last thing, can I ask for take-out lunches?”

“I don’t see any problem with that, but where will you be heading off to?”

“Just somewhere for work.”

“Well, don’t work *too* hard now.”

“I’ll try not to,” I replied with a chuckle.

With nothing to do until breakfast, I went back to my room and practiced

magic some more to kill time.

After my meal, I put food for lunch in my satchel and left for Granhart's room.

"You took your time." He was standing there, waiting for me with another young man who looked to be in his twenties.

"Good morning. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

The stranger laughed jovially. "Don't worry about it. I bet Mister Gran here didn't even tell you when we were meeting, did he?"

"That is most certainly..." Granhart met my eyes, then looked away.

"That is most certainly exactly what happened," the other man sneered. "Name's Jord. I'm the guy who used to do your job. Until today, that is."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Luciel... Your successor, it would seem."

"Take this," Granhart interrupted, presenting me with the same white robe that Jord was wearing.

"What is it?"

"All healers and paladins of Guild Headquarters, as well as all healers of A-rank and above, are given these robes. They were woven with holy thread to protect against miasma."

They glistened with a pure, silvery-white sheen. I'd get laughed out of the room if I wore this flashy thing into an Adventurer's Guild.

"'Holy thread'? They look expensive."

"Ten platinum pieces, to be precise. But that's beside the point. As long as you are wearing these robes, you represent the Healer's Guild, and foolish antics will not be tolerated."

Ten platinum... One billion yen... Where did the Church get the money from? I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

"Understood."

"Take these as well." He handed me a card and a knapsack. The knapsack I could understand, but I was less sure about what the card was for.

“What is this?”

“You can use it to take the magic elevator and leave the castle without my permission.”

“I can?! That’s great; thanks!”

“I give this to you because I’m a busy man, but you must promise to cause no trouble. You’re also forbidden to bring the diseased, children, pets, anyone, or anything into headquarters. You must swear you will not.”

I wasn’t in much of a position to argue. “I swear.”

“Good. Jord and I, Granhart, bear witness to this oath.” The card suddenly flashed, startling me.

“What was that?”

“A contract. If you break it, this card will be voided and you will be punished. Act wisely.”

“I’d take his advice. The Church loves their punishments,” Jord noted.

“I’ll be careful.”

“Jord, I leave matters to you.”

“You got it. Okay, follow me.”

Together, we stepped into the elevator and descended.

“There’s a shop a bit farther down.”

Ahead of us, I could see a faint light, the shop that Jord had just mentioned. I followed him, the pale glow of the elevator behind us reassuring me that it hadn’t stranded us here.

We soon reached the source of the dim light.

“Well? Surprised?” Jord gave a handsome smile as he looked around the room.

I was indeed surprised. Swords and armor like you’d find in a video game decorated the room, while spellbooks crammed the shelves.

“Any magic stones you find in the labyrinth can be traded in for points that you can use to buy all sorts of stuff.”

“There’s so much here.”

“Right? There are grimoires you can’t get anywhere else, so you’ve got plenty to work towards. No one’s here at this time, so let’s get to it.”

“I’m a little nervous.”

“Dungeons’ll do that to you. Past this point, we’re officially in the labyrinth.”

The moment Jord opened the door, a wave of foreboding washed over me, like a stifling gale of oppression, or the feeling that someone (or *something*) was staring straight at me. But Jord continued on as if it were nothing to him.

A bit farther along, the hall opened up, offering a much better view of the area. It was just bright enough not to need torches, like the sky at dawn. It didn’t feel all that different from the corridors of the church, actually, except for one massive difference: the smell. A faint yet persistent rotting stench wafted through the air. I could handle it if I had to—it was no Substance X, after all—but boy I wished I didn’t. Unfortunately, I would probably end up getting used to it.

Just in case, I cast Aura Coat on myself before we went any farther. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust the fancy robe I’d been given, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Eventually, we came to a staircase leading downwards.

“Monsters’ll show up past here. Just watch how it’s done for now.” Jord sauntered off like he was going for an afternoon stroll until we came across a wandering zombie. He raised his hand and chanted, “*Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Banish the impurities before me and shepherd them unto deliverance. Purification!*”

A pale, glowing mist shot forth and engulfed the creature, swallowing it whole in a brilliant flash of light. When the light faded, the zombie was gone, replaced by a crimson stone.

“And that’ll be your job from now on. Undead are attracted to living things, so

all you have to do is wipe them out with Purification. Oh, and these are the magic stones I mentioned.” He picked one up and showed it to me.

“Wait, what would the plan have been if I didn’t know how to use that spell?”

“I’d heard you knew it already, but if not, I would’ve just had you practice a bit. Purification works on groups of enemies, not just one, so it’s a solid strategy,” he explained. “Well, good luck!” And with that, he was gone.

“I know it’s gross down here, but did he have to bolt like that? Whatever, I’ll just take it slow.”

I shrugged off my robe to equip myself with a sword and some armor from my satchel, then pulled the garment back on and began exploring.

I was expecting swarms of monsters, but it was only the first floor and they were nowhere to be seen. The only downside to this apparent cakewalk of a job was the putrid odor. And while that might have been an issue for most, my Substance X-trained nose was unfazed.

“Something tells me I should be making a map while I go. Whoa, there’s a zombie. Ah, crap, there’re a few of them. I...guess that doesn’t matter. God, Buddha, ancestors, lend me your strength!” I faced the undead with a calm mind and chanted, *“Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Banish the impurities before me and shepherd them unto deliverance. Purification!”*

Nope, not calm, not calm! Holy crap, zombies are scary in real life! I ended up shooting off three Purification spells in a row, even after my enemies had been vaporized. It reminded me of when I would waste all my ammo shooting zombies over and over in arcade games in my past life. The difference was, this wasn’t a game.

When I came to my senses, the monsters had been replaced by four stones. “Uh, I thought there were only three of them. Was I that frazzled? Ah, whatever. At least I won.” I picked up the stones and checked my status screen. “Huh? I’m still level one? What the heck, why?” I looked at my status again. Then again.

When you beat monsters, you leveled up. That was how it was supposed to

work. At level one, taking out a single goblin was supposed to be enough to kick you up to level two. That could only mean two things: this was an illusory training ground created by Lord Reinstar, the pope, a saint, whoever. Or killing zombies offered very little XP. The third option was that the HQ healers were simply pranking the new guy, but with a salary that high? Not likely.

“I’ll just make the most of it and use this place for some general practice, then. If I level up, great; if not, I’ll still get something out of it.”

I infused the sword Brod had given me with magic and began my own private zombie-slashing training. The things were so slow that even I had no trouble cutting them down. Plus, Purification had its limits (the size of my MP pool, to be exact), but if this magically-infused sword worked out, I could take home plenty of those stones. Especially since, upon testing it out, my magic was only consumed at the exact moment my blade made contact, and only by one or two points, which I could recover easily enough as I went. I had a feeling I’d be getting good mileage from this trick.

Compared to Brod, these walking corpses moved like molasses. I was never able to react in time to my instructor, but I’d improved enough to be able to follow his movements, and these guys were nothing after fighting him. Thanks to that, I got to test out how healing magic affected the undead.

I gripped one of their heads, cast Heal, and, to my surprise, the creature simply disintegrated. Unfortunately, it made my hand reek to high heaven. It took a whole separate cast of Purification just to get the stink off.

I wandered around the floor, ignoring the staircase that led farther down, slaying zombies along the way. I felt practically invincible. As I meandered, I made a mental map of the place and cursed myself for not bringing a pen and parchment. The whole floor was roughly three hundred meters on each side, and the corridors were about five meters wide, so fighting down here didn’t feel too cramped. It was the perfect place to train in holy magic and build up combat experience at the same time, even if it turned out to be fake. The jury was still out on whether any of this was real or not, but I was feeling confident. Now that I knew I could handle myself, my movements were becoming smoother and more relaxed.

“This job’ll be a piece of cake if this is all I need to worry about.”

I continued to wander until I decided it was time to head down to the second floor.

“It’s still bright down here...”

Add a treasure chest and I’d start to wonder if this was just how they threw welcoming parties in this world. The stench wasn’t at all welcoming, though. I was starting to understand why the job paid so well.

I finally reached the second floor.

“Oooh, there’re zombie bosses and minions now. And is that a fireball? What were they called again, will-o’-wisps? Or was it will o’the wisp? Whatever, I’m calling it a fireball.”

I figured I should see how Purification and my magic sword fared against the new enemies and took a test swing. The monster before me dissipated immediately.

“It’s dead already?!” Floor two was looking to be as easy as the first.

My confidence renewed, I continued on until I found the stairs to the third level, where I sat down for a break. I quickly ate my lunch and chugged my usual dose of Substance X, keeping my guard up throughout, but not a single monster came near me.

“I thought Jord said the undead were drawn to living things? I bet he was just parroting what his own predecessor told him.”

With a full stomach, I commenced my exploration of floor three. Substance X had killed my sense of smell nicely, making progress even faster this time around. That is, until I came across a pack of skeletons and lost my cool a bit. Several rapid-fire casts of Purification left my body on the verge of magical exhaustion, which was rather embarrassing.

Eventually, I picked myself back up and, after some decent additional training, decided that my first day had been a success, and finally made my way out of the (*hypothetical*) undead labyrinth.

But not before firing Purification on myself first.

04 — Crossed Wires

The moment I emerged from the labyrinth, I was hit with a face full of Purification. “What are you *doing*? Are you messing with me?” I blinked at the sudden flash of light.

“Good to see you’re alive. You were down there for half the day, so I was starting to think you’d been zombified.”

I couldn’t tell if Jord was pulling my leg or just an airhead. I had reached the conclusion that the labyrinth was, without a doubt, nothing more than an advanced training facility. If my level had gone up as I killed the monsters, I would have considered death to be a real possibility, but after beating all those enemies and still nothing? I was convinced that I wasn’t in any real danger.

I placed my hand gently on Jord’s shoulder.

“What? Why’re you staring at me like you’ve suddenly got the whole freakin’ universe figured out?!” he shouted.

“Wow, you read my mind. Are you an esper?”

“Uh, what’s an ‘esper’?”

Hm, I guess that isn’t a word in this world. Noted.

I cleared my throat. “I mean, I trained a lot at an Adventurer’s Guild, so I know how dangerous (*real*) monsters are.”

“Oh, yeah, I did see a report about that. You’re pretty weird, you know that?”

He could say that to me with a straight face? Yeah, he was an airhead.

“Another thing I know is that pride gets you nowhere. You only have one life.”

“Still, this was your first time in a labyrinth, right? Sure, they’re just (*real*) zombies, but you must’ve had your hands full.”

“They weren’t too tough. It was nice and bright, so I didn’t need a hand for a torch either.”

“Well, look at you. You must be pretty tough. I barely hung in there (*to the*

second floor) my first three months.”

“I’d say I’m decent enough at fighting. I’ll be all right. I plan to start pacing myself from now on (*past the third floor*).”

“Good goin’, new guy.”

“Oh, also, these (*probably illusion-making*) stones. Where do I take them, the Adventurer’s Guild?”

“Nope, to the shop just over there.”

“Right, you did say that earlier. I guess the Adventurer’s Guild wouldn’t be a good idea (*since they probably wouldn’t buy rocks and this training ground is supposed to be a secret*).” I looked over at the shop’s counter.

“Yep, you got it. (*Can’t have it getting out that the Healer’s Guild HQ has a labyrinth below it, after all.*) I’m glad you’re quick on the uptake.”

“So, I exchange these stones for points over there?”

“Oh, Jord.” At the counter was a young woman who hadn’t been there this morning. “Is the rookie safe?”

“A-okay.”

“Thank you for worrying about me, but I’m just fine. I’m used to this kind of thing (*from horror movies and video games*).”

“Impressive,” she replied with a grin that warmed my heart. “You can turn in your stones for the day over here.”

And the warmth was gone as fast as it had come. *It’s her job to be polite, Luciel; get it together.*

“Sure, they’re all in here.”

I hoisted my bag onto the counter with a heavy *thunk*. Jord and the woman stared in disbelief. The knapsack that Granhart had given me was special in that it had been meticulously crafted for the sole purpose of carrying these stones, allowing the wearer to remain unburdened by the weight.

“Sorry, there are a lot. Can I turn them all in at once?”

“Sure, but wow, that’s more than ‘a lot’!” the woman exclaimed. “Don’t push

yourself too hard, okay? Your life is precious.”

“Very true. I’ll remember that.”

“Can I see your card?”

“Card? Um, my guild card?”

“The one Gran gave you earlier today,” Jord clarified, recovering from his disbelief.

“Ah, right.” I handed it over.

“All together, that’s 4,216 points. Quite the achievement for your first day. It’s been ages since I’ve seen someone make that much in one go. Now, before you leave, will you be buying anything?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know how much any of these items cost.” Price tags would have been nice...

“Everything here’s in your price range. The most expensive items we have are the grimoires. The most advanced one goes for a million points.”

“That’s going to take some saving,” I laughed. All of this was exactly like a game. I had to wonder if the pope who set it all up had been reincarnated like me, but no, there was no way.

“We also have potions and magic items to help mitigate status debuffs.”

“Hmm, and what are those weapons over there?”

“Those were all handmade by dwarves out of silver and holy silver. They’re effective against the undead.”

I had lots of experience with beastpeople but had yet to see any elves or dwarves. “Wow, how much are they?”

“Two thousand, five hundred for one.”

“What?! Why are they so cheap? You can’t be making a profit off that.”

“The only people allowed down here are exorcist healers and not many of them can even hold a sword right. The Church keeps us from reselling them, but no one here actually wants them.”



Monsieur Luck was back in action. “That still seems absurdly cheap. How can no one at all want them?”

“Healers can’t cast their spells while swinging a weapon around, can they?”
Um, but I can? “Zombies may be weak, but you’ll still wind up monster food if they surround you.”

Wait, Brod had told me that everyone could cast and wield a weapon simultaneously. I wasn’t sure how that made me feel, but it certainly worked out in my favor, so...all’s well that ends well, I guess?

“That does sound like a problem. Do you have a lot in stock?”

“More than we know what to do with. I hear they used to be sold for two hundred thousand each, but now they’re just sitting around in storage.”

Monsieur Luck, I could kiss you. “In that case, I’ll be back to pick up a sword and spear tomorrow,” I declared without hesitation.

“They certainly weren’t kidding when they said the new guy was an odd one.” She hummed in thought. “This *is* your first time, so I think I’ll do you a favor and make it four thousand points total if you promise to stay alive.”

I was practically on cloud nine. The fact that she was around the age I had been when I’d died only added to my joy. “I’ll bring back even more stones tomorrow. I’m Luciel; it’s a pleasure to meet you and I look forward to working with you.”

“The pleasure’s mine, Luciel. I’m Cattleya. Oh, and Jord, you did great work down there.”

“Er, yeah, thanks,” he replied. Was it just me, or did he seem sort of out of it? Maybe because he’d be seeing Cattleya less from now on? They were about the same age too, after all. Well, whatever he was feeling, it was none of my business.

And so ended my first day on the job, if I could call it that, as an exorcist of the Church of Saint Shurule.

05 — Positive Mindsets for the Eternally Level One

I woke up the next morning before sunrise with a big yawn.

“Man, I’m tired. Still not feeling any different today, so that labyrinth has to be an illusion.”

While I stretched, I checked my skill levels and practiced my magic fundamentals.

“Looks like my Short Cast level went up and Magic Circle Casting’s almost at level one now.”

I didn’t usually check my skills every day. Right now, I just had my eye on Holy Magic since I still couldn’t use Area High Heal or Dispel yet.

“Over eight hundred points up from yesterday. Wow.”

My Magic Control, Magic Handling, and Holy Magic skills had all shot up considerably. I never thought mock battles could be so effective. For a skill to reach level one, your proficiency needed to reach one thousand. Level two required a proficiency of two thousand, and every subsequent level called for an increasing amount. From level nine to level ten, which was the maximum, you had to rack up 512,000 experience points. It was a massive hurdle and knowing about it in advance didn’t do much good.

Leveling magic skills was best done by casting level-appropriate spells, which increased one’s proficiency by a maximum of five points each. For example, at level one, casting Heal perfectly with a vivid image in mind and the magic flowing smoothly would give you five points. Doing the same at level two would net you four points, level three, three points, level four, only two, until finally only one point was awarded when at level five and above.

I poured through my grimoires constantly, chanting the spells, abbreviating them, and studying the magic circles. I practiced, and practiced, and practiced, and the results spoke for themselves. You improved magic by casting it. That was all there was to it and I was more motivated than ever.

“If I keep this up, I should make it to level eight in half a year. All right, let’s do

this! I'm gonna hit that cap by the time I'm twenty!"

After my morning training, I made my way to the dining hall.

"Good morning. Another extra-large serving, please."

"And a good morning to you, Mister Luciel."

"Please, you don't need to do that. Just Luciel is fine. The 'mister' feels too formal."

The woman smiled. "You're one strange boy, my dear."

"Another lunch to go as well, please. The same as yesterday's."

"Now, I might be talking to a brick wall, but don't forget to rest every now and then!"

"I'll be okay. I've been through much worse (*when my life used to flash before my eyes on a daily basis*)."

"If you say so, but be careful."

I took a seat and was enjoying my meal when I heard someone call out to me from behind. I turned around and saw Lucy.

"Oh, good morning."

"'Good morning'? Forget that; I heard they made you an exorcist!"

It had barely been a day. Where had she gotten the news from?

"Word travels fast."

"Are you okay? It must have been intense (*fighting all those monsters*)."

"Not at all. Those (*fake*) guys were no problem."

"No? Well, Lady Lumina was worried too, so let us know if there's anything we can help with."

"I appreciate that. Oh, there is one thing. Do you know where I can get a pen, parchment, and some ink?"

"That's all? You'll find plenty in the storage room."

Everything around here seemed to either be dirt cheap or completely free.
“Would you mind showing me where that is later?”

“Not at all, but why don’t we have breakfast together first?”

“I’d love to.”

As we ate, I talked about my life at the Adventurer’s Guild while Lucy struggled to hide her horror. When we finished, she showed me where to find the supplies I had asked for, and then it was back to the labyrinth of (supposed) undead.

The beast let out a throaty growl.

“Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Banish the impurities before me and shepherd them unto deliverance. Purification!”

I was currently drawing up a map of the floors I had memorized yesterday, harvesting magic stones from the “zombies” along the way. Each floor took about an hour and by the start of the fourth hour, I had cleared the third floor.

“What monsters does the next floor have in store?”

It was only day two, but the labyrinth had lost all sense of urgency for me. It really felt like nothing more than a game. Consequently, I was going with a bit of a unique build: a short spear with a wide guard that could double as a shield in my left hand, and a sword in my right. Hordes of undead fell to my new Sword-and-Spear Style.

If Brod saw me like this, he’d totally kill me, but if I could turn it into something... *Yeah, wishful thinking.*

“He’ll straighten me out if I wind up with any weird habits. I’ve just gotta keep my form steady.”

Anytime I found myself with a decent view of the surrounding area, I stopped to fill in my map. Most of the monsters that showed up on the fourth floor were zombies as well, except that some were dragging swords behind them this time. They were too slow to pose any real threat, though.

I kept the pace up until I reached the fifth floor, where I called it a day. My second day's haul got me 5,372 points, much to Cattleya's concern.

"I really hope you aren't pushing yourself," she said again.

"These early floors are easy enough. Is there a (*financial*) problem with how much I'm turning in?"

"No, not at all. It's perfect for us, honestly."

I wondered if she was a merchant by trade. "Then I'll keep bringing in more."

"So, what'll it be today?"

"I'm planning to save up for that grimoire, but if things get tough down there, I'll be back to stock up."

"Sounds like a plan. Keep up the good work."

"I will, thank you."

Things were going great, but I was still running blind in terms of what I was actually working towards. I bumped into Granhart during dinner, and he asked me how I was holding up.

"Pretty well, all things considered," I replied.

"That's good to hear. About your wages, the funds will be transferred to your guild account at the beginning of each month. You can verify that all is well at the front desk on the first floor, if you feel compelled to do so."

He left the dining hall without another word.

"He waited here just to tell me that? I think I'm starting to get a read on that guy."

After another dinner alone, my mug of Substance X, and my usual magic training, I turned in for the night.

The next day, I resumed my exploration only to learn the hard way that floor six introduced the problem of traps.

"That was...more accurate than I would've liked." I had stomped right on a switch in the floor and an arrow had zipped by two meters ahead of me before vanishing when it hit the opposite wall. "I assume I'm supposed to take that as a

‘Hey, dummy, watch out for traps now.’”

But the monsters were the same old thing. Zombie archers that never actually used their bows and “knights” that merely scraped their swords along the ground; fireballs that telegraphed their attacks by glowing bright then launching smaller, only slightly more threatening fireballs at less than walking speed.

“Even if this labyrinth were real and I were actually surrounded by these things, I still don’t think I’d die.”

I did make sure to mark where traps were on my map, though.

Baddies had started showing up in greater numbers at this point, so I decided to head home after clearing that one floor. I was so used to the stench already that the whole labyrinth had become my personal training grounds. I’d finish my work here and make it back to Merratoni in no time at this rate.

Afterwards, I turned in my points, had dinner, drank my Substance X, and practiced my magic. “Feels like I’m getting more into the swing of things every day. Hey, maybe...” I hurriedly opened my status screen but my excitement quickly waned. “Figures.”

Level: 1

“Whatever; I knew I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up. At least my stats are improving. Just gotta keep that positive mindset.”

Still, I went to bed in a huff that night.

The days came and went with impressive uneventfulness as I progressed all the way to floor ten, which I reached on my tenth day. As it turned out, there was only one trap per floor, but that, plus the increase in monsters, was enough to make me more cautious and slowed down my progress. Armored skeletons, including archer and knight variants, joined the party as well as ghosts, which seemed to replace the fireballs. Even zombies started coordinating in groups under the control of a zombie “boss” of sorts.

“But Purification wins every time. It feels like cheating, really.”

Three full casts was all it took to turn entire groups of twenty into harmless

magic stones. And now, my journey had come to a sound end.

“That was totally a boss room.”

As I made my way back to the dining hall, my mind raced with thoughts of what might lie behind the door on the tenth floor. I was nervous about my first boss fight, but I challenged myself with a goal: to beat it without taking a single hit.

“I have no clue what might pop up in there, though. Some hints would be nice,” I muttered just in time to catch sight of Jord. *The perfect target to dump my questions on.* “Jord, do you know what’s in that boss room in the labyrinth?”

“Boss room? What’re you talking about?”

Hmm, they don’t call them “boss rooms” here. Then what, fiend lairs? Master rooms?

“That place that looks like it has the stronger monsters.”

“Oh, you mean where those (*boss*) zombies come in groups?”

“Er, (*the bosses*) come in groups?”

“That they do. But wait, you made it all the way down there? It took me until just before you took the job to get that far.”

I didn’t know how long he had held the post for, but there was no way it had taken him all that long, right? “You don’t need to flatter me. I appreciate the information, though. Now I can work on a strategy.”

“Really? If you say so.”

New knowledge in hand, I set about crafting a flawless plan of attack for my first boss fight.

06 — Conceit and the Boss Room Menace

“Status, all good. Magic, full. Equipment, stocked.” I was all warmed up, had had a good breakfast (minus the usual), and was raring to go.

The (theoretically) undead labyrinth stank like nobody’s business. And after thinking about it, I realized that maybe there weren’t many exorcists like me who were used to such rancid smells, and that was why Jord had made such slow progress. Assuming this was a job they tossed to all newbie healers, there likely weren’t many who had actually cleared the whole thing. But if there were some who had, could I get a fabulous prize for clearing it faster than anyone else? I wanted to believe that, anyway. Just thinking about it had me so excited that I’d hardly been able to sleep.

Yesterday, I’d used up fifty thousand of the approximately ninety thousand points I’d saved up to buy a holy silver bow along with twenty silver arrows, all of which I’d stuffed into my magic satchel. I wasn’t particularly good at archery, but having more options never hurt.

Along with my bow and quiver, I had Brod’s magic-sensitive sword in my satchel, plus a second holy silver one-handed blade, a holy silver shortspear, and four barrels of Substance X (which I had picked up from the Adventurer’s Guild earlier and kept in my bag because they stank too much to leave out for long). Once my new job calmed down a little, I really needed to get myself a second satchel.

On a side note, when I went over to the Adventurer’s Guild, Granhart found out that I had left the castle without my robe and made me promise never to do so again. I was grateful that he didn’t make up another contract, and that he didn’t punish me, for that matter, but I wasn’t looking forward to my next outing.

Anyway, my lunch brought my total items to ten, meaning my satchel would be full. I hoped I could find some bags with a larger carrying capacity that were within my price range.

“I’m letting myself get distracted. Focus on taking down that boss, Luciel,” I

told myself as I entered the labyrinth.

Each floor took me about ten or twenty minutes, give or take. When I reached the tenth floor's boss door, I took a short break.

"Jord mentioned they would come in a group. The question is how big that group will be. So first, I'll start with Purification, then thin them out with my sword and spear. If it gets dicey, I'll fall back on Purification again. Simple, but I'm doing this solo, so it'll work." And of course, this was all an illusion anyway, a training ground for newbies. How could anything go wrong?

I put an ear to the door, but it was completely silent.

"Does someone summon them or something? Hard to say. Well, no use wondering. A bit of Substance X'll remind me of my fights with my master and hype me up."

I took out a barrel and downed a glass, then remembered there was a rumor among adventurers that monsters avoided Substance X for some reason. Did that include the undead too? Whoever made these illusions clearly had their work cut out for them, given they could handle the way this labyrinth reeked.

As I readied myself to open the iron door, never once did it cross my mind that I was about to understand true fear.

The door swung into the room with a long, ominous creak that reverberated throughout the hall. I didn't let it faze me and continued into the darkness.

"They could do without the theatrics, though, I gotta say."

I readied my weapons. A moment later, the door slammed shut behind me, but I had expected that and kept my eyes forward. As darkness closed in, the room was suddenly relit to have the same sort of glow as the corridors outside, revealing a sea of monsters before me.

"Okay, yeah, I wasn't expecting *that* many."

Their numbers obscured my vision and every single one of them was looking my way. Zombies, skeleton knights and archers, more monsters than I could even count, filled the massive chamber. Ghosts and fireballs loomed overhead. I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed them before. I hadn't once let my guard down,

yet there I was, my back to the door, surrounded by nightmares.

But nothing had happened. I hadn't been attacked yet. I had panicked a little, but quickly convinced myself I was still in this and began to chant. *"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Banish the impurities before me and shepherd them unto deliverance. Purification!"*

I couldn't believe what happened next—absolutely nothing.

"What? Why?" I felt no magic leave me and my panic grew.

The undead didn't waste their chance. All at once, they descended upon me. Since coming to this world, never had I experienced such peril. I poured my magic into my weapons and slashed like mad, form be damned. For my entire descent through the labyrinth, I had been cutting down small groups with blades and handling larger ones with Purification. Now I was up against a writhing mob without any magic on hand. Never had I experienced such terror, illusions or not.

"Dammit! Stay away! Stay away from me!" I shrieked, flailing my sword and spear about. "They block your magic inside this room?! You've gotta be kidding me! They *really* don't want me to have that prize!"

I had let myself get cocky. I was no protagonist. I was no prodigy. This was my own fault; I hadn't done enough information-gathering, and that was all there was to it.

"You're a wimp, Luciel! How could you forget that? You're weak!" I spat, disgusted by my own carelessness as I continued to frantically thrash about.

"God, these things hurt! Is the pain some fancy fantasy world hallucination too? Ow! Who just scratched me?!" I shouted. "Ow! Knock that off!"

I lopped the squirming zombie's head off. "Would you stop biting me?! You're really starting to piss me off!"

I swiped at the monsters with my spear to give myself some space, then took off at a sprint. My no-damage dream was dead, but Brod had still been tougher than this lot. He had been scarier. A slash with my sword here, a block with my spear there, I slowly but surely reduced their ranks.

If this had been real, this boss room that I'd been looking forward to oh so much, I would have collapsed on the spot out of fear, and that would have been it for me. I considered that, perhaps, this was meant to instill new healers with some respect for the knights. Perhaps that was why Granhart had obeyed Lumina several days ago. But I figured now wasn't the time to ponder such questions.

I didn't want to be deadweight—the guy who couldn't hold his own—so I ran and ran around the room, “kiting” the enemy horde. All for that fabulous prize. That was all I had on my mind. My desires became power and I dispatched one undead enemy after another. For how long, I couldn't say, but thanks to my armor, the nicks and scrapes I took didn't amount to much damage.

No matter how many I slew, however, their numbers never seemed to dwindle. The only indication that I was making progress was the increasingly frequent glint of those crimson magic stones. So I kept at it, cautiously maintaining my distance and running around like a madman. Brod's training carried the day.

Eventually, if not quickly, the entire horde was vanquished.

“That's all of them,” I wheezed between gasps of air.

Red stones blanketed the room. I stood there, taking it all in, unable to move and with only just enough energy to stay on my feet. A cast of Heal would have fixed me right up, but I knew I had to be just about out of magic by now. Physically, mentally, magically, I was utterly drained in every sense of the word. Not even Brod could have whipped me into action. Well, actually, yes, he could have, but I would have passed out right afterwards.

“I've never been happier to have been trained by him. Now there are just all these stones left to pick up. Yeesh, this is gonna be a pain. I'll step out and heal up fir...” I felt a chill run down my spine and leaped forward, spinning around.

Something horrible, something blood-curdling, had fallen from the ceiling onto where I had just been standing. I sensed a terrifyingly intense bloodlust oozing from it, every ounce of it directed at me.

I gaped at the creature. “Please don't tell me that wasn't the boss fight

earlier. Is the prize *that* fabulous? Or is the Healer's Guild just that stingy? Or am I just that weak?"

The thing was undead, clad in a sheer white clerical robe, and it wielded a staff of incredible magical power. On its head rested a crown. At first glance, I thought I was up against a lich or something, but there was no way an enemy that strong would be on a floor this low. Then the answer came to me.

"A wight?! We're not gonna start off with a wraith or something?! I mean, I'll take neither, if that's an option!"

As if having taken offense, the wight raised its staff and gathered magic to it, then fired a ray of pure darkness. It streaked towards me at speeds greater—scratch that, *far* greater than any I'd dealt with so far. I failed to dodge it completely and the blast grazed my right thigh. An intense, searing pain began to throb from that one light scrape.

Wincing, I chanted, "*Oh Lord, receive my energy and mend this wound. Heal!*" Okay, that's cool, so *my* magic still doesn't work, but *his* does! What a coward!"

I'd known I was low on magic, but the pain was bad enough that I had to at least try. To no avail, though.

"I refuse to die here! I'm clearing this room and getting that prize!"

My body was a whirlpool of adrenaline. In that moment, beating this boss was no different from working towards a raise at work. As the wight began to charge up its staff with more dark magic, I condensed my own magic into my lance and hurled it at the fiend, forcing it to abort its attack and dodge away... Like it was telegraphing that it couldn't handle combat up close.

That gave me an idea.

07 — A Battle Decided, Papal Negotiations Underway

Under my robe, I kept my satchel slung over my shoulder. I jammed a hand into it and pulled out my bow and quiver.

“Get ready, pal.” I nocked an arrow, pulled back, and took aim. The wight growled ominously. When I found my target, I infused my magic into the arrow and let it fly just as the creature grew impatient enough to resume charging up its own magic. The arrow zipped straight past the monster’s left side, barely grazing its robe. I immediately prepared my next shot, lamenting how little I’d practiced archery.

Although I had missed the first shot, the wight had dodged to the side with an angry roar. I felt its rage swell in the air between us, possibly because I’d interrupted its casting. Or maybe because I’d torn its robe. Or possibly both.

“Get on with it. Start your next spell,” I taunted, hoping to gain time to recover some magic and stamina. Thankfully, I had been trained in the art of Brod.

I’ll buy you a souvenir when I get paid, Master, I thought as I fired my next arrow. Again, it zipped harmlessly by my adversary. I prepared the next shot, but the wight simply wouldn’t attack. It only howled, and I shared in its frustration.

I continued to shoot and miss, and it was starting to wear me down. “I think this is where some sort of latent potential is supposed to suddenly awaken!”

Gradually, I felt my strength return enough to allow me to move... For a time, at least. I loosed my thirteenth arrow, then set things in motion. I was running on pure adrenaline now. Cattleya had said that healers couldn’t cast while swinging weapons around because magic required concentration. I didn’t know if the same rule applied to the undead, but it was the only hint I had to go on, so I clung to it.

The wight’s rage and hate towards me were palpable, so intense that it would have burst a blood vessel if it had had any. In short, it was *pissed*.

“I’m honestly a little impressed you can stay that angry. People normally can’t

be mad about the same thing for more than fifteen minutes. But then, you're not a person; you're a monster."

Were my provocations working? I had no idea. But I kept them up, breathed, and watched for my chance. I worked and reworked the plan in my head, firing arrows, searching for just the right moment. Then I launched my seventeenth arrow and dashed straight at the monster. It dodged widely in an attempt to protect its robe, but it knew I was coming and began to cast its spell. And that was the moment I'd been waiting for.

I shot my last three arrows in quick succession, causing the magic it had accumulated in its staff to break apart. An instant later, I pulled Brod's sword from my satchel and imbued it with magic, then pounced and brought the blade straight down onto the monster's crown, driving through its body and splitting it in two. Down it went.

Normally, this would have been the moment where the body vanished. If it weren't a boss-level enemy, that is. It picked itself up off the floor behind me and prepared to fire a deadly spell at my back.

"Saw that coming a mile away! I knew the jerk who made this place wouldn't make my life that easy!"

I pivoted around and picked up the shortspear conveniently placed at my feet, then hurled it like a bolt of energy at the wight, which had now reformed itself. As the spear pierced its withered skin, I charged forward and drove it in deeper before raising the sword in my left hand and cleaving the ghoul's head clean off.

This time, stay dead! I cried in my mind.

The head shrieked as it arced through the air, until it, along with the body, vanished like dust in the wind, leaving only its robe, staff, and necklace, along with a red stone several times the size of any others I'd seen so far.

"Yes!" I cheered, then winced as I remembered the aching in my body. "Please work this time. *Oh Lord, receive my energy and mend this wound. Heal!*"

A familiar pale light enveloped me.

"So, no magic until you beat the boss. These illusions aren't too different from

video games.”

After a short break, I cleansed myself with Purification and cast Recover for good measure, just in case.

“That covers any status conditions.” I tended to my remaining wounds with Middle Heal, but left my fatigue and burning muscles to their own natural recovery. “If I let myself get weaker by the next time I see Brod, I... I don’t even wanna think about it.”

I pushed my exhausted body for one last spurt of activity and collected the stones scattered around the room, as well as the robe, necklace, and staff, after casting Purification on them all.

When I finished, there was a sudden rumbling in the ground. A new path leading down had opened up.

“Of *course* there’s more. I get the point already, guys.” I peered down the stairs. “Hold on...”

I dashed back to the main chamber door and pulled on it, praying, until it creaked open. Without any items or magic for escaping dungeons, I didn’t know what I would’ve done if I hadn’t been able to leave. Relief washed over me.

“How am I gonna bring all this back? I’ve got four barrels of Substance X, Brod’s sword, lunch... No way I can leave any of this behind. I need to take these three boss drops, so what can I leave here?” Between my holy silver sword, shortspear, bow, and quiver, I could only fit one into my bag. “Oh, duh, why don’t I just wear my sword? And I’m getting hungry, so I’ll have lunch now.”

I cast Aura Coat and Purification as usual, then chowed down on my delicious meal, topping it off with my normal dose of Substance X.

Wait, oops, I already had some before I came in, I remembered too late.

My body was done. I decided this would be a good place to call it a day, so as soon as I finished eating, I hastily made my way out of the labyrinth.

Cattleya stood at the shop counter.

“Hi, Cattleya.”

“Hey, there. Back so soon?”

The fight had been a tough one but hadn’t lasted very long, especially compared to my usual excursions.

“I got roughed up a bit, so I wrapped up early.”

“You’re still new. It happens. I’m glad you’re pacing yourself.”

“I don’t know. I let myself get cocky. I feel like I could use a pep talk,” I said, grinning wryly as I hauled out my bag of stones.

“I suppose that means you’ll have less points this time.”

“It might actually be more. And once we’re done with this, there’s something I want you to look at.”

“Well, now I’m curious. Let me see what you brought.” I dropped the bag onto the counter with a *thunk*, and when she opened it, the wight’s massive gem was resting on the very top of the pile. “L-Luciel, what is this?”

“Yeah, about that. You know the boss room on floor ten? There was a huge swarm of monsters there and I couldn’t use my magic. It was a nightmare.”

“‘Boss room’? Wait, did you say floor ten?”

“That’s right. I managed to take out the swarm, but after that, this wight showed up. He had a crown, and floated around the place, and shot magic at me. I thought it was all (game) over.”

I had considered having the wight’s items appraised at the Adventurer’s Guild, but I didn’t know if they belonged to someone, so I decided to ask Cattleya first.

“Why would you do something so reckless?” Her usual calm demeanor had vanished. She was almost scary.

“I wasn’t trying to. I had no idea what was in there, or that I wouldn’t be able to use magic. No one told me.”

“No one explained any of this to you?”

This was starting to seem like Jord’s fault. And, I mean, it kind of was. “No. It is only my eleventh day. And I’m an exorcist. Isn’t this my job?”

"You're... Yes, it is." She paused. "Um, are you free right now?"

"I was just thinking about heading back to my room to rest."

"There's somewhere I'd like to take you when we finish here. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, sure." As if I had any choice.

"These stones come out to 108,914 points."

"Er, you're sure that's not a zero too much?"

"Yes. It's correct."

"Oh. Okay." Well, it *was* a boss.

"And you had something else to show me?"

"Right. I can't appraise these things myself. When I beat the wight, it left behind some of its equipment. Also, I purified it, just in..." I reached out to take back my card from Cattleya and her face was right there in front of my nose.

"Show them to me!" she shouted.

Maybe back up first! Why are pretty girls so terrifying?!

"S-Sure, no problem," I stuttered. "This is the robe, the necklace, and here's the staff."

Cattleya picked up each of the items thoughtfully, one by one, then placed them back onto the counter. After a short while, she said, "Put these back in your bag and follow me." Then she hopped over the counter and started towards the elevator. "*Now!*"

"Yes, ma'am!" I had no idea what was going on. I just did what I was told. One thing was obvious, though—there was more to this woman than simple shopkeeping.

"Oh, well hey, Cattleya, Luciel," Jord greeted us. "Where're you guys hurrying off to?"

Cattleya was having none of it. "Somewhere in a *hurry*, Jord."

"Right, sorry," he apologized, his face paling as he cleared the way.

"Sorry, I don't know what's happening either," I said quickly as I followed

Cattleya.

Anxiety filled every step we took. We passed through highly restricted areas that I never thought I'd set foot in. Through the paladin and templar area, up past the priests and bishops, and even beyond the archbishops' area, then into yet another elevator—one that I knew I would never have found myself in under any other circumstances.

Cattleya, meanwhile, hadn't said a word. I wanted to speak to her, but could never find the right time. This wasn't the healthiest environment for a conversation. So we just kept walking.

One more elevator later and we came to a room labeled "Papal Chambers."

Cattleya knocked on the door. "It's Cattleya, Your Holiness. I beg an audience to discuss an urgent..."

Before she could finish, a voice came from the other side. "You may enter."

"Follow me and do as I do."

"Okay."

Beyond the door, I saw women who looked to be ladies-in-waiting of some kind. They paid no mind to Cattleya, instead focusing their confusion and suspicion on the stranger behind her. The room itself resembled an audience chamber like you'd read about in stories, with the pope hidden behind a veil. I felt out of place, to say the least, but continued on all the same.

Cattleya stopped just before the stairs leading to the pope and took a knee. I followed suit.

"Cattleya, it pleases me to see you well. The boy you bring, however, I have no name with which to greet. What is it that brings you to me?" The voice behind the veil was gentle, ineffably mystical, and, to my shock, young and feminine. The pope was a woman.

"The boy is our newest exorcist, Your Holiness," Cattleya reported. "He took the post some days ago and has shown to be staggeringly efficient in his work."

"Oh, has he? Surely you have more to tell me."

"Indeed, Your Holiness. Today, he reached the tenth floor of the labyrinth and

did battle with a wight. The fiend's lair seems to have held magic-obstructing properties unbeknownst to us."

"Is this true?!"

"It is. The boy managed to retrieve the wight's garments. My appraisal deemed his report to be accurate, so I've brought him here to you."

This wasn't Cattleya; not the one I was used to, anyway. I realized she must have had some sort of appraisal skill.

"I see. Boy, you may speak. I would have your name."

"My name is Luciel," I answered.

"Luciel, reveal the items of which Cattleya speaks."

"Of course, but please be aware that I purified them with magic in case any of them were cursed."

"Acknowledged."

I handed the robe, necklace, and staff to a nearby attendant.

"I doubted my suspicions, but no longer," the pope said. "This garb can be that of none other than Ozanario, whose whereabouts have eluded us since some dozen years ago. And here is his spirit necklace. And the staff of disruption. You have done well to return his effects."

The items must have been quite important.

"The spirit necklace," she continued, "halves the consumption of magic. The staff of disruption diffuses and disturbs magical energy, rendering the spells of others ineffective. This disseminated magic can then be harnessed, accumulated, and emitted. It is a powerful weapon."

It sounded OP, to be honest.

"Luciel, I wish to keep these."

There wasn't a chance in hell I was allowed to deny her. Not with Cattleya next to me, who I was sure would kill me if I tried. But I was entitled to ask for *something*, wasn't I? I wasn't beholden to her, after all. It was time to put my business skills to use once again.

“They must mean a lot to you,” I remarked. “And given how powerful they are, I’m sure you could never put a price on them. I understand. They’re yours.”

“You have my gratitude.”

“I’m flattered, Your Holiness. But if I may be so bold as to ask a favor in return...”

“I would hear it.”

“During my exploration of the labyrinth, I’ve found myself constantly in need of greater carrying capacity. My magic satchel is too small and I would be extremely grateful for a larger one.”

“That is all you require? If so, I will gladly lessen this burden with not a magic satchel, but a magic bag. It will allow you to store items frozen in time within a pocket dimension the size of this very chamber, and all of its contents will be known to you.”

The pope sure was generous. “You would give me something that valuable?” This chamber was huge. Unless the pope could make one herself, an item that incredible shouldn’t have been on the bargaining table.

“I would, in return for your continued aid. Should you discover anything of note on your journey, return here with Cattleya and you will be rewarded. See her on the morrow to retrieve your new bag. I am in your debt, Luciel.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness.”

Cattleya and I bowed, then exited the chamber.

“You’ve sure got guts, Luciel,” Cattleya sighed as we left the room.

“Er, I do? I was pretty nervous back there.”

“You definitely didn’t seem like it, the way you asked the *pope* for a *favor*.”

“Was I, uh, being rude?”

She chuckled. “I think you were fine. She wouldn’t have offered that magic bag if she didn’t like you. Relax a little.” The nervousness on her face wasn’t very convincing.

She showed me back to familiar halls before we parted ways.

“I wonder if she works directly under the pope?” I mused.

The tension and excitement of having defeated my first boss had dissipated, but I found solace in the thought of that fancy new bag I’d be getting.

08 — Training With the Paladins

“Status Open.” A hologram appeared before me.

Name: Luciel

Job: Healer V

Age: 17

Level: 1

HP (Health Points): 450 — MP (Magic Points): 180

STR (Strength): 73 — VIT (Vitality): 111

DEX (Dexterity): 76 — AGI (Agility): 73

INT (Intelligence): 108 — MGI (Magic): 107

RMG (Resistance to Magic): 100 — SP (Skill Points): 0

Magic Affinity: Holy

SKILLS

Assess Mastery I — Monster Luck I — Martial Arts V

Magic Handling VII — Magic Control VII — Holy Magic VII Meditation V —

Focus VII — Life Recovery IV

Magic Recovery VI — Strength Recovery V — Throwing IV

Butchery II — Detect Danger IV — Ambulation IV

Parallel Thinking II — Swordsmanship II — Shields I

Spears II — Archery I — Short Cast IV

Null Cast I

HP Growth Rate Up VI — MP Growth Rate Up VI

STR Growth Rate Up VI — VIT Growth Rate Up VI

DEX Growth Rate Up VI — AGI Growth Rate Up VI

INT Growth Rate Up VI — MGI Growth Rate Up VI

RMG Growth Rate Up VI

Poison Resist VI — Paralysis Resist VI — Petrify Resist VI Sleep Resist VI — Charm Resist II — Curse Resist VI

Enfeeble Resist VI — Silence Resist VI — Disease Resist VI Shock Resist II — Bewitchment Resist I — Spiritual Resist I

TITLES

Shaper of Destiny (all stats +10)

Protection of the God of Fate (increased SP)

Adventurer's Guild — Rank E | Healer's Guild — Rank A

"Still level one. Am I just spinning my wheels? Wait, my stats have gone up." Way up, in fact.

It had only been a week and a half since I started my labyrinth diving, and all of my stats had shot up by at least fifty percent. What was the deal with that? I also now had this Bewitchment Resist skill, which only cemented my conviction that the labyrinth was an illusion.

After returning to my room yesterday, I'd spent hours going over the fight in my head, considering all the ways I could improve. But criticizing myself just made me feel depressed. I wrote up an itemized list of all the ways I had let my arrogance get the better of me.

One piece of parchment was, painfully, not even close to enough. I had forgotten to use any of my barrier magic beforehand (I was *right* in front of the boss door and that didn't even cross my mind? Come on, Luciel!), panicked when I couldn't use magic, and used my sword and spear less like bladed

weapons and more like clubs. My sword was chipped from having hit the walls and floor so many times, and my lance was bent in multiple places.

If Brod found out, I'd be in for a world of hurt. If Gulgar found out, I'd be in for a world of hurt in liquid form. I might have sounded paranoid, but I had enough experience with those two. They were not to be trifled with, and I'd learned that well. Still, at their core, they were good people and wouldn't take things too far.

I was thinking about asking the paladins or templars to let me join their training one of these days when my stomach interrupted my thoughts with a growl.

"That's enough introspection. I need some grub."

"Luciel!"

On my way to the dining hall, I heard Lucy call out to me. She was accompanied by Lumina and another young woman I didn't know, who looked about the same age as me.

"Good morning, Lucy, Miss Lumina. And I don't think we've met. I'm Luciel, an exorcist."

"Good morning, Luciel," Lumina replied.

"Morning," followed Lucy.

"Good morning. I'm Queena," said the new girl. "I'm with Lady Lumina's regiment."

"It's nice to meet you, Queena. Are you all on your way to breakfast?"
Running into friends first thing in the morning was always nice.

"We are," Lumina replied. "As we do every morning after training."

"That explains why we've never seen each other before. Good thing I had a late start today."

"You seem in good spirits," she giggled. "The word around the palace is that you have accomplished a great deal in your short time here. I've been hearing rumors about a healer with modest combat abilities."

“Oh, yeah, that. Actually, something related has been on my mind all day.”

“If it’s an ear you need, we have some to lend. Will you eat with us?”

Monsieur Luck was up early today. “I’d love to.”

As we ate, I talked about my work as an exorcist, yesterday’s mistakes and all.

“Luciel, have you gone mad?” Lumina chided me, incredulity plain in her eyes.

“Do you have a death wish?” Lucy sneered.

“You’re an idiot. If luck wasn’t on your side, you’d be dead right now,”
Queena, who I’d only just met, spat matter-of-factly.

“I thought you were no longer an ignoramus, but I see now that you’ve merely traded ignorance for recklessness,” Lumina continued. “I despise those who forsake the gift of life.”

“I beat myself up over it all night already, guys. Please, you’re killing me here.” Their scornful gazes made me want to run away and hide in my room. Maybe some people were into that sort of thing, but I wasn’t.

“So, what are you going to do about it? Keep this up and you won’t last long.”
Lucy didn’t mince words, but I could tell she was worried in her own way.

“You’re right. Honestly, I wish I could just go back to Merratoni and continue my training.” I wasn’t holding my breath, though.

“Healers can’t be transferred from Headquarters without a writ ordering the move,” Queena informed me.

She seems knowledgeable, I thought, when Lumina’s gaze caught my attention from across the table. She broke into a dashing grin.

“If it is training you want, I believe we can deliver.”

“Wait, really?” The thought gave me pause, but it wasn’t a bad idea.

“Indeed. You may find it rigorous for a healer, but I have no qualms about allowing you to join us. However, do not expect personal instruction.”

“As long as it doesn’t get in the way of my job, I’d be more than happy to.”

“I must warn you once more, a paladin’s training is severe.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. Anything it takes to get stronger.”

“You ought to prepare yourself thoroughly. We conduct comprehensive sessions on the Day of Fire, weekly.”

“Understood. Thank you so much.”

With our plans decided and breakfast eaten, I made my way to the (totally real) undead labyrinth. My new goal was the twentieth floor. That was, of course, assuming the floors leading to it gave me as little trouble as the first nine levels. Either way, it was going to take some time—time that I could use to learn from my mistakes and curb my hubris. I *had* to have that fabulous prize.

I stopped by the shop, but Cattleya wasn’t there. “Guess there’s no magic bag today. Oh well.”

I descended once more into the labyrinth.

I trudged along, doing my usual purifying routine, but this time with a twist: I started to vividly visualize the cleansing in my head as I cast the spell. As a result, the monsters seemed to evaporate more cleanly than before.

“I think I’m on the right track,” I muttered. “But man, please don’t let that wight show up again.”

This time, before entering the boss room, I cast Area Barrier on myself to raise my physical and magical defenses. When I reached the center of the room, the door shut behind me as it had the day before.

“And there’s the swarm. Let’s hope my magic works.” I optimistically cast Purification, destroying a huge chunk of the horde at once. “That’s it?!”

Three more Purifications, some cleanup, and I was done in less than a minute. The boss didn’t reappear.

The ground began to quake and the path downward soon reopened. At the bottom was a door that I hadn’t noticed last time. I worried for a moment that it might shut behind me when I walked through it, but continued down anyway, hoping I wouldn’t have to go through all this noisy stone-rumbling rigmarole

every time I came down here.

As expected, the door did close behind me. I opened it up again and saw that monsters had repopulated the boss room.

“The person who made this is seriously screwed in the head.”

I took a short break, then began my exploration of the eleventh floor.

The walls, which had been pure white on the floors above, were a dark red. It was convenient that the floors were marked in units of ten, but the purpose of it made me anxious. What if there were traps that would leave me somewhere else in the labyrinth at random?

I pierced a zombie with my spear, then stabbed it with my sword as I pulled the other arm back.

“Wonder if I shouldn’t be skimping on my martial arts training,” I mused. “And these zombies not getting any stronger feels weird.” They had gotten faster, but only a little. Not enough to be any sort of issue.

I strode through the halls, picking up magic stones, and noticed that they appeared to be wider than before, but that was the extent of the changes. Monsters appeared at the same rate they always had. I probably had yesterday’s nightmare to thank for today’s level-headed approach.

Once I had seen all there was to see on the eleventh floor, my stomach growled with perfect timing. I checked the menu clock. It was just around lunch time, so I sat down on the stairs and set out a barrel of Substance X.

“That stuff really does work wonders for keeping monsters away. Why don’t all adventurers carry a keg with them?”

I finished lunch and, after clearing the twelfth floor, clocked out for the day.

Cattleya was waiting for me at the counter. “Welcome back, Luciel. Let’s see those stones.”

I pulled out my bag. “Thanks. Here they are.” *Crap, yesterday’s got me all nervous around her.*

“Aw, don’t be so scared. I won’t bite. And there we go; you made 12,219 points today.”

That was more than I’d expected. The monsters hadn’t seemed any different... Unless they had?

“Sorry, you were just so imposing yesterday that it’s made me a little nervous. It got me wondering if maybe you used to be a paladin or templar, or even if you used to be under the pope’s direct command.”

“Oh, Luciel,” she tittered, “don’t you know not to pry when it comes to women? Some of us have secrets that are best left buried. Who knows what’ll happen if you go digging?”

“Yeah, good point, some questions don’t need to be answered!” I laughed nervously.

The perfectly normal shopkeep beamed from ear to ear. “Ah, before I forget, your magic bag.”

“It’s here?!” I cried in excitement. “Wait, it looks like any old bag.”

“Put some of your magic into it.”

I did as instructed. “Whoa, it changed color!” The leather sack had shifted from brown to pale white.

“It’s yours now. Anything within a meter’s radius that you touch can be willed into the space inside. When you want to take something out, just envision the item and will it to appear. Test things out; see what it can do.”

Simple enough.

“Thank you.” I held the bag and concentrated. I felt...books? “Are there grimoires in here?”

“You guessed it. Her Holiness said to give you all the spellbooks we have as a little motivation boost.”

Talk about divine providence. “Even those over there?”

“Yep. Even those.”

Was it just me, or was Monsieur Luck really putting in the overtime lately?

Now I was free to use all those points I'd saved up on other things.

"In that case, I'll take four holy silver swords, four shortspears, five sets of bows and quivers, and I think a set of potions."

"Just for the record, this isn't a free pass to be reckless, okay?"

To be honest, Cattleya had started to scare me more than any labyrinth. But I kept that to myself and quietly hoped the old Cattleya was still in there somewhere. I thanked her again then returned to my room. Once there, I immediately got to reading my new grimoires and practicing the new spells they contained.

The next day, I made it to floor fifteen. And soon, it was time to train with Lumina and her paladins.

09 — Morning Drills with the Valkyries

Early that morning, after my mug of Substance X, a knock at the door interrupted my Magic Handling practice.

“Who is it?”

“Good morning. I am Ripnear, a member of Lady Lumina’s Valkyrie Paladin Regiment. Training will begin soon, so I’m here to collect you.”

“Thank you, I’ll be just a second.” Before anything else, I cast Purification on myself to get rid of the usual after-smell. According to the grimoire, cleansing magic was all-encompassing and more effective than any other form of hygiene. It was particularly handy as a mouth freshener, and for saving on toilet paper.

On the other side of the door (and considerably lower than eye-level) was a cute girl with big, round eyes and fluffy blonde hair that cascaded down in waves. Her unrefined armor stood in stark contrast to her fragile appearance.

“Thank you for going out of your way. I’m Luciel. Nice to meet you.”

“No thanks necessary. I’m only following Lady Lumina’s orders. Healers are normally forbidden from entering the paladins’ training grounds on their own. Now, let’s go.”

Despite her dignified way of speaking, I just couldn’t bring myself to see her in that way. She had this cute and snug feel about her that her style of speech only amplified, like she was forcing herself to do it on purpose.

I followed her through the castle, trying my best to keep from smirking.

“Wow, this is pretty big.”

The training grounds were spacious enough to hold a full four-hundred-meter running track.

“Our regiment’s grounds are rather small compared to others,” Ripnear said.

“Huh? Oh, really?” There were several of these around here?

“You’ve arrived. Thank you, Ripnear. Luciel, come,” Lumina beckoned.

The rest of the regiment had already gathered, and Ripnear ran up to join the formation. I had expected a squad of paladins to be a bit more populated, but there were only eleven of them including Lumina. And they were all so young.

“Um, are there only women here?” I asked.

“Indeed. Is that a problem?” Lumina and the others peered at me.

The honest truth was that I just didn’t want to hit a woman. My master was one thing, but a scar on a young woman meant more than a scar on some old guy.

“I know you’re all probably stronger than me, but I don’t know if I can bring myself to attack a woman.”

“No? Then it seems my previous judgment was correct. You are indeed an ignoramus. Forgive me, but our time is limited. We must move on. Please introduce yourself.”

And that was that, apparently. I was an ignoramus. Were they *that* strong?

“Um, sure, sorry. Hello, everyone; I’m Luciel, a healer. I work here as an exorcist. I wanted to get back into training and Miss Lumina kindly offered me a chance to join you all. I’ll try not to get in anyone’s way. Thank you for having me.”

“Take note, ladies,” Lumina addressed the team, “this healer is a strange one. For two years, he was coached in combat at an Adventurer’s Guild. Now, I want you all to show him how a paladin trains. His healing magic will keep him on his feet. Introduce yourselves when the opportunity arises. Is that understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the regiment sounded.

“Good. As always, we’ll begin with warmups. From there, we will proceed to one-on-one, one-on-two, and two-on-three sparring. Ready, ladies?”

Lumina kicked into a jog, and the other paladins promptly followed.

“Don’t just stand there,” Lucy chided, breaking my trance.

“It’s just a little running,” Queena added.

“Got it!” I replied, trailing at the very end of the pack.

For two whole years, morning and evening, I had sprinted for hours on end. So yeah, running was no problem. Heck, running was nothing to me...or at least, that's what I would have said if reality ever let me have anything.

"Raise your knees, Luciel! Run with purpose! Your healing can't carry your legs!" Lumina called as she lapped me with the other paladins.

Contrary to what she must have believed, I was running as hard as I could. It was everything I could do to keep the air in my lungs flowing. But the cold, hard truth was that, to these girls, this was nothing but a light jog.

In this world, physical ability was ruled by stats—that was a fact of life. If you didn't have the numbers, you couldn't succeed. That limitation was an impenetrable wall and I'd slammed right into it.

It felt senseless, like my training with Brod had been nothing but a drop in the ocean to these women. Just as stats were linked to one's capabilities, so too were they linked to one's chances of survival. That was simply how things were.

But I couldn't accept it. I refused to let arbitrary levels and jobs be the judge, jury, and executioner for what I could and couldn't do. So I shut out those preconceptions, that reluctance towards working with a regiment of women, and focused on what I could do right now, in this very moment—train with the Valkyries.

A humiliating thirty minutes later, after being lapped by the girls eight more times, the jog concluded.

"Form groups and begin sparring. Luciel, I want to see your abilities first-hand. Take your blade and strike me with the intent to kill," Lumina ordered.

"Don't you use dulled swords for practice?"

"Hm, worry not, you will not draw blood," she smirked. "I suppose, however, that if you do land a blow, I ought to indulge you in a courtesy."

She carried no sword or shield, and I knew that wasn't meant as a slight to me. She was just that good. But that was fine by me.

“I’m gonna prove that stats aren’t everything.”

I took my stance before Lumina with my trademark sword-and-spear style. With a throaty grunt, I thrust my spear forward, then used the momentum of it to pivot and propel a swing of my sword. I anticipated her dodge and reeled back to kick— “You’re wide open!”

My vision blurred and suddenly I was seeing stars in the sky, just like when Brod would throw me.

“This is the style you’ve been fighting in the labyrinth with?”

“Yeah...”

“Without any experience in dual-wielding? Your recklessness astounds me. Stand and ready yourself. Come at me with the skills you learned during your time at the Adventurer’s Guild. Exactly as you were taught.”

“All right.” I steadied myself and pulled out my tragically underused shield, adopting the stance Brod had drilled into me. It reminded me of my training days.

*

“Listen up, Luciel; most o’ what you’ll be up against will be stronger than you.”

“Ha, probably.”

“Not probably. You can bet your ass on it. If you’re up against someone one-on-one, nothing beats getting the hell outta there, but the world isn’t all sunshine and rainbows.”

“Right.”

“There’s one thing you have that other combat classes don’t, though.”

“Healing magic?”

“Bingo. And you’ve got a feel for casting while on the move now.”

“More or less. I *have* been doing it for a year and a half.”

“You can’t beat someone stronger than you, so be clever. Plant traps.”

“Traps? Like what?”

“Like faking an opening while you’re in the middle of a spell.”

“That...doesn’t sound like it’d end well for me.”

“Normally, you’d use their attack against them with a feint like that, pull a reversal, but you’re just flat out not good enough to try it. They’d counter it like it’s nothin’.”

“Ouch. Well, you’re not wrong, but I still don’t like where this is going.”

“You’ll take the full hit, then hit ’em right back while you heal yourself. That’s pretty much all you’ve got to work with.”

“A suicide attack? You know if I slip up once, I’m done for.”

“Relax. You’re gonna master it by the time this half-year’s up. Count on it.”

“I-I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Thought you didn’t wanna die?”

“Can you prove I won’t die in the process of training not to die?”

“I won’t aim for your vitals. We’ll start off with your arms and legs.”

“So, you’ll *eventually* aim for my vitals?”

“Take your stance.”

“Wait, Master? Can you answer the question first? Master!”

“Hope you’re ready!”

“Gyaaahhh!”

*

“Luciel, why are you crying? Are you in pain? I apologize if I was too forceful.”

The memories had brought tears to my eyes. “Oh, no, I was just thinking back on my (hellish) training.”

“I can only imagine how (wonderful) it must have been, to bring you to tears.”

“Anyway, I’m ready now.” I threw up an Attack Barrier and held up my sword and shield.

“Make your move.”

I lowered my stance and rushed her. This time, I concentrated on the fundamentals—my footwork—maintaining my form like a rock. Still, it felt hopeless. I was going strictly by the book and the gap in our abilities was just too wide.

Lumina saw an opening and needled at the cracks in my defense with counter-attacks that I only just managed to block with my shield. I responded with counter-attacks of my own. And on it went, back and forth, fruitlessly trading blows. Nothing was going to come of our session this way, so I settled on a gamble. There was a technique I wanted to try.

I swung my sword wide, from left-to-right, leaving my center open to attack. This feint was one of the few things Brod had complimented me on in the past. According to him, my lack of ability made it seem less like a trick and more like a mistake.

Lumina took the bait.

“Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Render my energy an angelic breath and mend this wound. High Heal!”

As my body began to glow, I cleaved my sword back to the left with all my might, but struck only air. Lumina had utterly vanished.

“Splendid maneuver!”

And then everything went black.

“...up... Wa...up... Wake up, I said!”

A flash of pain shot across my cheek.

“Ooowww!” I cried, shooting up. Lucy and Queena were standing over me.

“Wait, where am I? The training grounds?”

“Good eyes. Training’s over, so we’re all going to eat,” Lucy said.

“Lady Lumina’s left you to us.”

“Oh, right, I got knocked out. I appreciate you two waiting for me.” I stood up

and cast Heal on my stinging cheek.

“She knocked you out good, Luciel. I’m a little impressed.”

“I’m amazed she would acknowledge a *healer*,” Queenena agreed.

I tilted my head in confusion.

“Anyway, there’s more training where that came from. Come on, let’s get breakfast.”

“We’d better hurry. We’re the last ones here.”

“Oh, right.”

The girls hurried me along to the dining hall.

10 — A Series of Unfortunate Nicknames

Lucy, Queena, and I arrived at the dining hall and ordered our food. All the deviations from my usual routine had left me feeling a bit off.

“Good morning,” I greeted the regular serving lady. “Today’s been rough, so I’ll take a little more than usual, please. And I won’t be needing a take-out lunch.”

“Morning, dear. You sure you can eat all that?”

“I’ll be okay. I’ll need the energy later.” It felt like I was back in my sports club, preparing for a long night of practice on the field. I carried my mountainous breakfast to the table Lucy and Queena were sitting at.

“Sorry for making you guys wait.”

“I’ve had this question for a while, Luciel, but how can you stomach so much?” Lucy asked, staring at my pile of food.

“It’s not so bad. I used to be all skin and bones, but my master back in Merratoni told me ‘the first step to being strong is a good appetite.’ And being strong means less chance of dying, so it’s kind of a habit now.”

“I’ve got my own question,” Queena added. “Why do you act so friendly with the waiters and waitresses? It’s weird. You’re not *actually* friends.”

“What do you mean? A person should show respect to people in authority, but that doesn’t mean you need to be rude to people who aren’t. And I’m not a fan of the whole ‘mister’ thing either. I’m not *that* important.”

“Ignoramus,” the girls rang out in impressive unison.

“You’re a deacon, aren’t you? An exorcist?” Lucy asked.

“That’s right,” I replied.

“Deacons and exorcists are below priests,” Queena explained, “but they’re effectively the same level of authority as a knight captain. They’re paid the same too.”

“Huh. No wonder the salary’s so good.”

“This isn’t some minor issue, Luciel. One of these days, someone’s not going to like that attitude of yours,” Lucy warned.

“Eh, I’ll just keep doing my job well and go crying to the pope if that happens.”

The paladins, once more in practiced unison, heaved a sigh.

All I had to do was get on the pope’s good side and I was sure she’d lend me a hand if anything happened. The Valkyries, however, seemed to pay particularly close attention to rank and status, even though I’d never gotten that impression from Lumina. I figured it might have had something to do with their education and how they were brought up.

We chatted a bit more and, once we finished eating, I stopped by my room for Substance X. Once I caught up with the girls in front of the restricted grounds, I apologized for making them wait for me, and we entered together.

“Let us resume,” Lumina ordered the regiment. “Seeing as Luciel has joined us today, we will be conducting an escort exercise. Defenders must protect their person of interest from attackers during the allotted time limit. Should the attackers deal a blow to the person of interest, they will be the victors. Questions?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I raised my hand.

“Ask.”

“Is magic allowed? I don’t think I’ll be able to hit anyone otherwise.”

“Hm.” She thought for a moment, then answered, “That is a reasonable threat to consider while escorting someone. I will allow it.”

“Thank you.” This way, it wouldn’t hurt so bad when I got my butt handed to me.

“You will be divided into teams of five and are to continue the exercise until I signal its end. Luciel will be your person of interest. Guard him well.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the paladins replied.

We’d begin on the outskirts of the grounds and make our way to the center.

Simple. My team, like a secret service squad, was decidedly untalkative, which I assumed would change in the event of an emergency.

On the defending team with me were Lucy, Queena, Ripnear, and two new faces. One of them was Myra, who kept her hair tied up in a ponytail and had a domineering presence. The other, Saran, wore her gear less than modestly, leaving her rippling abs exposed for all to see.

I introduced myself to both, but Myra struck me as the strong, silent type, so she was a mystery to me. Saran, though, talked like a sailor sometimes, and I was convinced she was a softie deep down.

We made our way down the field, and the fighting started. They were on us like flies. Arrows started flying, some right by my head, and someone shoved me down. I couldn't make heads or tails of anything—chaos had descended all at once. All I could manage was an Area Barrier.

The attackers quickly swarmed us, then came the clanging of swords and shields.

“This way!”

I didn't know who the voice had come from, but I followed it, keeping my head low until we made it to the wall. Once I finally got my bearings, I saw that Lucy was standing with me while the others held off our pursuers.

Just then there came a firm, “Enough!”

The paladins quickly formed up to hear Lumina's appraisal.

“Defenders, congratulations on your victory. Attackers, you fought well. Now, I would like to consider a few points of improvement...”

In summary, Lumina's review went as follows:

Attackers

Grew impatient at being unable to break through at a five-to-four advantage.

The entire team rushed into close range.

Only attempted to attack the person of interest at the beginning of the

match.

Defenders

Only reacted to the attack once the arrows began to fly.

Should have planned out a route beforehand, as well as several safe alternatives.

Lumina turned to me. "Any thoughts, Luciel?"

"Not particularly. The arrows were so quiet, I could barely hear them coming. I had no idea who was attacking with what or from where. The whole thing was kind of a blur. I guess if I had to describe my impression, I'd say it was nerve-racking, but not much else."

"Hm, I will take that into consideration. Anyone else?" A girl with curly blonde hair raised her hand (one of the attackers). "Yes, Elizabeth."

"Our team's defeat was most certainly invited by the mistakes you spoke of, ma'am. However, I believe the greatest factor in our loss," she pointed at me, "lies with him." The others on her team nodded in agreement.

Lumina smiled, then she, too, nodded. "Well said. Lucy and her team have been paladins for barely five years. Under normal circumstances, they would stand no chance against your combined experience. The unfortunate truth, however, is that the defenders had an abnormality: a boy who, by the young age of seventeen, has achieved level five as a healer and possesses a Holy Magic skill of seven."

Hold on, where had she gotten that information from? Did she have an appraisal skill like Cattleya?

"But that's...that's not possible!" Elizabeth cried, incredulous. "Not by any amount of talent!"

This time everyone nodded, including the defenders.

"Peace, Elizabeth. As I said, he is an anomaly. A 'weirdo,' so to speak," Lumina stated with absolute certainty and little regard for my mental wellbeing.

"Come on, I'm a weirdo? Isn't that a little rude? Especially coming from you,

Miss Lumina.”

“Oh, am I wrong? Please do explain how my reports of you boarding at an Adventurer’s Guild ten days after registering with the Healer’s Guild are inaccurate. I believe you were given meals, a bed, and training in exchange for healing.”

Where in the world was all my personal info being leaked from? “Er, well, you’re not wrong, but I was desperate. I just wanted to learn how to survive, no matter what.”

“I’ve heard you were beaten to the ground from dawn until dusk, yet you never backed down. As I recall, this earned you some rather interesting epithets.” A positively radiant smile spread across her face. As beautiful as it was, I had a bad, *bad* feeling about it.

“Did my ears deceive me, Luciel the Masochist Healer? Or should I say, Zombie Healer? What else would the owner of such colorful titles be if not a weirdo?”

I prostrated myself before her. “Please, have mercy. I don’t know where those names came from. I was only trying to survive. I’m begging you.”

“Your sexual proclivities aside, I see now that my reports of your zombie-like determination were indeed accurate. Thank you for confirming them.” She had already known all of this. I was just a puppet for her sick little show. “You healed not only adventurers but common folk every day, without rest, for one silver each, yes?”

I might have been in my thirties on the inside, but Lumina was clearly beating me in the race of mental maturity. Unless my new body was physically holding me back...

The other paladins looked baffled, muttering amongst themselves.

“That’s insane.”

“I suppose all healers’ reputations are doomed from the start.”

“Your confusion is understandable,” Lumina interjected, “but I would advise you to regard Luciel’s healing skill as one would view a practiced veteran’s.”

I had no idea if she was praising me or just teasing me again, and I knew I wouldn't get an answer now. The escort exercise continued with rotating teams well into the afternoon.

"Enough! You may disband for lunch. Return here and we will depart for the forest once your preparations have been made."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Although Lumina had announced the end of training, it didn't mean I had time to rest. All throughout lunch, the Valkyries pelted me with question after question about my life at the Adventurer's Guild. Very little time had gone by since my departure from Merratoni, but I found myself missing my master, Nanaella, and the others more and more.

I sensed the clamor at our table garnering cold glares from those around us in the dining hall (good practice for detection skills?), but these weren't adventurers so I wasn't in any danger...right?

Lunch flew by.

"Gather and saddle your steeds, ladies. We enter the wilderness to slay monsters."

Amid a cacophony of "Yes, ma'ams" came a single confused, "What?"

All eyes turned towards me.

"You have a question, Luciel?" Lumina asked.

"Uh, not exactly. I've just never ridden a horse before."

Lumina, along with everyone else, looked positively flabbergasted. "That is...unexpected," she said, the word "ignoramus" all but flashing in her eyes. But how could a paladin regiment assume that everyone and their mothers had ridden horses before? "It is what it is," she said resignedly. "I will have you practice with the stablehands. Our exercises are liable to be observed by others, you see."

"I'm sorry. I feel bad about this."

“It’s nothing. I lacked consideration. You may use the field to practice and we will return when our exercise is done.”

“Thank you. You all be careful.”

“Ladies, make your way there. I will be with you once I’ve seen Luciel to the stables.”

When we arrived, Lumina introduced me to the man in charge.

“Luciel, this is Yanbath, the stablemaster. Yanbath, this is the newest exorcist, Luciel.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’ve never even touched a horse before, so I’ve got some learning to do. I’d really appreciate your help.”

Yanbath looked like an average middle-aged man. “Mister Luciel, please raise your head! I’m only a stablemaster.” Compared to Brod and the gang, he seemed older, but that was an unfair comparison. Those top adventurers were probably the exception.

“He is in your hands, Yanbath.”

“Of course, my lady.”

“Luciel,” Lumina called as she mounted her horse and looked back at me, “learn well.” Then she galloped off like a gallant cavalier.

“Wow, that was cool.” I turned to Yanbath. “Thank you again for your help.”

“Think nothing of it.”

My first horse awaited.

11 — The First Ride and the Anxiety Cure-All

Yanbath and I returned to the empty training ground with a dark black horse.

“Are you sure you’re okay with leaving the stables to teach me?”

“We don’t have many horses to tend to. Only the Valkyries’ and a few carriage horses for people of note.”

“Oh, okay. So who’s this here? Could you introduce us?” I gestured at the horse.

“This is Forêt Noire.” Wasn’t that a kind of cake? Well, it was French for “black forest,” that much I knew.

Horses, I’d heard, were pretty smart, so I couldn’t forget my manners. “It’s nice to meet you, Forêt Noire. I’m Luciel. You’re my first horse, so go easy on me.” I bowed.

“Mister Luciel, what are you doing?!” the stablemaster shouted.

“What am I doing? Aren’t horses smart enough to understand people?”

“Yes, but lowering your head to one is like swearing fealty to it!”

“Uh, really?”

“Really! Forêt here’s particularly sharp, so I think you’re safe, but please do be careful in the future.”

“Sorry. I know I have a lot to learn.”

I had blown it right from the get-go, and my ignorance was, yet again, all too apparent. From now on, Yanbath’s word was going to be law.

“First, stand in front of it and move to its side. Slowly,” he instructed. “Be gentle. Soothe it, stroke it. You’ll spook the poor beast if you’re too sudden.”

I did as I was told, moving along Forêt’s side, then resting my hand on his flank.



“It’s so warm.”

“Warmer than any man. Now, before you hop on, press on its back. That’s the sign that you’re about to mount.” I obeyed and the horse offered no reaction.

“Good. His temper seems well enough. You should be safe to slide onto the saddle.”

“Uh, just like that? I jump right on?”

“Yes, that is what we’ve been leading up to.”

“All right, then.”

I kicked off the ground and onto the horse’s back. The lack of stirrups made it a little wobbly, but I managed without issue.

“Well done. Now adjust your posture. Keep your back as straight as possible and your legs apart,” Yanbath coached without waiting for me to steady myself.

“Y-Yeah, um, Yanbath? This is pretty high up.” Much higher and a little scarier than I’d been expecting.

“All beginners feel that way. You’ll get used to it in time.”

“Do you not have any stirrups?”

“Stirrups? I’m afraid I don’t know what those are.”

“You know, those things you rest your feet in.”

“I can’t say I’ve heard of such a device. Is it perhaps regional?”

“Er, no, I’ve just heard about them in passing. I figured I would ask.”

I didn’t want to think about how exhausting long journeys would be without stirrups. I made a mental note to build some for myself later.

“Forgive me for not being any help. Anyhow, let’s get you moving. Squeeze your thighs down. You want to keep your center of balance steady or both you and the horse will be in for a rough ride.”

This reminded me of an old hobby from my past life. While riding motorbikes, you had to keep your balance and posture with knee grips in a similar way. But motorbikes weren’t this high up, nor did they hurt my crotch so much.

“Flicking the reins means ‘go.’ Pulling back means ‘stop.’ Pulling to either side means you’ll turn in that direction.”

“Got it.” I gave the reins a flick and Forêt started to trot.

“Good, good. Give the field a go-around.”

“Will do.”

Forêt carried me along at a pleasant, rhythmic canter. When we approached the edge of the field, I nudged the reins right and Forêt obeyed.

“Thanks, pal.”

We reached another boundary and turned again. Eventually, we made it back to Yanbath, where I gently tugged on the reins and brought us to a stop.

“Splendid job. I can hardly believe this is your first time riding.”

“I think I have Forêt to thank for that. I will say, though, I could see this being killer on your legs and butt after a while.”

“Oh, it certainly is. Your buttocks will chafe and your legs will burn like you’ve never experienced before. Riding uses muscles you might normally neglect. I suppose that will be less of a problem for you, though, healer sir.”

I replied with a dry smile. “Do you mind if I keep going?”

“Please, I’m sure Forêt could use the exercise. Just be careful not to go too fast.”

“Right, of course.” The field was barely large enough to trot around, much less shoot through at a full gallop. Yeah, no thank you.

Some time later, the Valkyries returned during one of my laps.

“The saddle suits you, Luciel,” Lumina called out.

I brought Forêt Noire to a stop. “You think so? Personally, I’d say my partner’s just smart and easy to work with. I’m convinced I’d have been bucked off by any other horse with half the patience.”

“Your confidence arises in strange places,” she chuckled. “Regardless, we have concluded today’s training. I hope you will join us again next week.”

“I’d love to, if I’m not too much of a bother.”

On that pleasant note, our first joint training session, and my first ride on a horse, came to an end.

I liked to believe that I was a considerate man, one who could read the room. So when the Valkyries invited me to dinner, I declined. That was my convenient excuse, anyway. The real reason was that I had actually done very little *real* training today and was feeling the itch. Assess Mastery showed that my Riding skill had increased, to be sure, but nothing else. It felt as if my entire day with the paladins had been a waste. How could I have progressed so little? I was filled with anxiety.

Was this slow skill growth the norm? Would I just have to live with it? No. I wasn’t done yet. Brod had warned me about chasing numbers and I certainly hadn’t done all I could. There was more for me to do here. I couldn’t let stats entirely define my satisfaction. As things stood now, any one of the paladins could have killed me in a real fight, regardless of my skill levels. Time spent worrying was time I could spend putting in the work instead.

So I passed my evening down in the tenth-floor boss room, using mobs of undead as my sparring partners until I felt content with the day’s efforts.

The next morning, I dove back into the labyrinth. From floors one to ten, only floors six and below had traps. Likewise, from floors eleven to twenty, the first five had none. By that logic, floor sixteen would reintroduce traps.

So here I was, scouring the floor, filling in my map, and beating the snot out of monsters with Aura Coat and both barriers up, because I wasn’t about to let myself get caught unaware.

“Having this magic bag for all these stones sure makes my life easier. The pope really came through.”

I even discovered that I didn’t have to be touching an item directly to retrieve it. Merely tapping it with my shoe was enough, and that alone saved me heaps of time. If magic bags had existed on Earth, well... There would have been a whole lot more magicians.

Suddenly, I spotted a noticeable protuberance in the ground. A neon sign flashing “this is a trap” couldn’t have been more obvious. I cautiously pressed it with my foot and a shrill alarm rang out. I was instantly surrounded by monsters on all sides.

“Huh, well, this is a new one.” I nodded to myself then cast Purification into one of the four hallways to clear a path. Once I’d made it a ways down the corridor and the monsters had funneled in, I held up my shield to block their claws and slashed them one by one.

Elizabeth had come to me this morning during breakfast to tell me that she was going to teach me how to fight properly (under the pretense that Lumina had asked her to).

“I would advise you to stop fighting in ways you haven’t been trained in,” she’d instructed me. “You’ll only develop bad habits.”

She and Ripnear were both dual-wielders, so they were to become my teachers. And until I properly learned the style, I figured it would be better to stick with what Brod had taught me.

“I assure you, I am only acting on Lady Lumina’s orders. But you still owe me one, understand?”

I silently hoped that being in debt to Elizabeth didn’t come with an interest rate.

I made quick work of the undead. They went down almost too easily, like they were nothing but fodder for the next boss fight placed there to lull me into a false sense of security.

Soon after, I completed my map of the sixteenth floor.

“This is a good enough spot for a break. Think I’ll have lunch now.”

As I drank my Substance X, I started to wonder, just how effective a monster repellent was it? How strong did a creature have to be for it to stop working? Had anyone ever bothered to test that?

While these thoughts swirled around my head, I resumed my work and cleared floor seventeen before feeling I should head on out. But the traps had

slowed me down considerably and I wasn't totally satisfied with the day's training, so I wiped the tenth-floor boss room three more times before finally going back.

The next day, I explored floors eighteen and nineteen, and then twenty the day after that.

"Another boss room. I've got a bad feeling about this one."

The thought of heading straight inside crossed my mind, but I had to be more prepared. I wanted to gather some information first, so I went straight back to the surface. Cattleya was waiting for me at the shop.

"Cattleya, do you know anything about the...what was it called? The main room with the big door on the twentieth floor," I asked.

"I'm sorry, but no. I've never been into the labyrinth," she replied. "I suspect you might find the remnants of another member of the guild who lost their life there, though."

Her expression darkened, but that had to have been an act. Sure, the pain I felt while fighting those things was real, but come on, I hadn't leveled up even once, and according to a book I'd read, undead (or real ones, at least) were sufficient enemies to use for leveling up. In any other world, Cattleya's looks, charm, and acting skills would have made her a real movie star.

"Maybe so. Thanks for the help. Do you know anything I should bring that might be useful?"

"If you insist on going, I won't stop you, but I hope you'll think twice about it. We have no idea what traps you'll find down there."

"I'm not jumping in just yet. I need to polish my fundamentals a little bit more."

"If you say so. I would recommend you carry around some healing and magic potions, and not only for the labyrinth. Recovery items are always essential, and from what I've heard about other dungeons, bringing food with you would be a smart idea too."

She was right about the potions. I had run out of MP during my last boss fight, and as long as I had food with me I'd never have to rush home to refuel. With this magic bag, I could be well-stocked for extended stays. I got the feeling these hints Cattleya was dropping would be vital to fully clearing the labyrinth.

“Okay, then I'll take some of the strongest potions you have.”

For the next two days, I went back and forth to the tenth-floor boss room, spawning and respawning the mob to do some basic grinding. In between breaks, I vaporized the undead with Purification, cut them apart, and honed my swordsmanship skills while hammering down my style and fortifying myself mentally against the fear of being outnumbered.

Then the day of my second session with the Valkyries arrived.

12 — The Honorary Valkyrie

I woke up even earlier than usual and after magic practice, started to inflate myself with imaginings of the beauty of dual-wielding. Today was the day Elizabeth and Ripnear would begin teaching me.

In my mind, dual-wielding was the art of trickery, of toying with your opponent with nimble movements. It wasn't the end-all of strategies, but there could be no fighting style more suited to buying as much time as possible. I was sure that not everyone shared the philosophy, but it was my own.

I thought back to the time in Merratoni where I had tried to one-hand a greatsword. Gulgar had seen my efforts go to waste, so he tossed me a pint in consolation. And not a pint of ale, mind you. Now that I thought about it, that was around the time they stopped diluting my Substance X.

Three knocks came at the door.

"Who is it?"

"Elizabeth of the Valkyries. I'm here to fetch you."

No Ripnear today. I wondered if Elizabeth was some kind of aristocrat. She always had a regal air about her. I downed my Substance X, cleaned my mouth with Purification, and opened the door.

"Good morning, Elizabeth. Thank you for coming all this way."

"You're quite welcome. I hope you've prepared yourself. Today you learn to dual-wield. And you *will* learn it well."

"Um, are you upset about something?"

"Nonsense. Let's be off."

"Okay then," I said, resigned. Something told me not to bother asking any more questions.

We headed for the training grounds. The regiment stood in formation just like the week before. They had all been waiting on me.

"Good morning, Luciel," Lumina greeted me. "Thank you, Elizabeth."

The paladin saluted her leader before joining the others in line.

“Good morning, everyone.” I moved to follow suit, but Lumina stopped me.

“Luciel, I’d like you to have this.” She held out a card for me, and I took it.

“What is it?”

“This card indicates your connection to the Valkyries. Please, it is yours. Carry it with you and you can freely enter the areas that are normally restricted to paladins.”

“Er, well, I’m a man and this is a women’s regiment. I know it’s only in name, but how can I be a Valkyrie?” This smelled like trouble one way or another.

“I spoke with a peer of mine and they were intrigued by the idea. So my superiors have allowed it. There’s nothing more to it.”

“I feel like there might be a little more to it.” Her “peer”? Who could that be?

“I would find your manhood and make peace with it if I were you, Luciel. Else you may worry the hair off your head. Now, let’s begin with warmups.”

Lumina jogged ahead. I heard giggling bubble up from behind, but when I turned around, the girls were already zipping past me. She had really hit me where it hurt. I wouldn’t have been such a punching bag if I weren’t so weak, but all I could do right now was try my best to rectify that someday.

“I’m not gonna go bald...”

I sprinted with everything I had.

No amount of gasping could have cooled the burning in my lungs.

“You’ve gotten faster,” Lumina remarked.

“You guys were still seven laps ahead,” I wheezed. That was one lap less than last week. A huge step up, but I still had a long way to go.

“I would call that fast for a healer, wouldn’t you?”

“Why are you asking me?” Did she have no other point of comparison?

“Moving along, ladies,” she called. “Except for Elizabeth and Ripnear, I want

you all to form pairs and spar. Then you and your opponent will join a round robin. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the paladins replied.

“Elizabeth, Ripnear, show Luciel a battle between dual-wielders. Then I want you to spar with him. No cutting or attacks to the vitals.”

No way; we were doing this with real swords? *I’d better keep a High Heal ready just in case.*

“Yes, ma’am,” the two answered.

“Disperse and begin.”

I fixed my eyes on the pair, ready to witness how Valkyries fought. Ripnear lowered her stance and quickly approached Elizabeth with a smooth elegance, then slipped to her left and slashed at her legs with her right sword. Elizabeth calmly parried, pivoted around Ripnear on her right foot, and went for her back with her left blade. But Ripnear, as if waiting for just that moment, flipped around and deflected it, using the momentum of the impact to distance herself.

One assaulted the other with a barrage of lightning-fast strikes, then the other returned in kind. I couldn’t bring myself to blink for fear of missing a single moment. Neither had the upper hand. What one could do, the other could mirror. There seemed to be no end in sight.

Their dance continued until Elizabeth blocked Ripnear’s double-bladed attack with a single blade of her own, then thrust the other sword forward, stopping only inches from her neck. And that was it. Ripnear’s mistake had undoubtedly been the moment she had tried to attack with both swords at once.

The fact that I’d been able to keep up with their match at all was impressive.

Lumina gave me a smile. “What did you think?”

“They were incredibly fast. And hyper-focused on each other’s weaknesses. It was like they were thinking dozens of maneuvers ahead, like they were reading each other.”

“And of dual-wielding?”

“It leaves you more open than I thought. The more you overreach, the more

you drive yourself into a corner. And you have to stay on the offensive. You can't let your opponent gain momentum. I have a few theories now."

"Indeed, I'm glad you were observing carefully. Dual-wielding lends itself well to feints, but your balance suffers for it. Oftentimes the finishing blow is the hardest to land. Now that you have a grasp of its disadvantages, I believe it's your turn."

"I'll do what I can."

My first match would be against Ripnear.

The moment the match started, I raised my physical defense with Attack Barrier, held up my shield, and waited for her move. Her attacks fell on me like a tsunami. From above, below, left, right, everywhere. I was like a turtle stuck in its shell, but I managed to endure the assault. Her unrelenting speed reminded me of Brod, but she wasn't as fast, not nearly as overwhelming.

I bided my time, noting her quirks, waiting for my chance. And I finally saw one. As she reeled back for a big attack, I thrust out my shield and watched. This was it! I caught her blade with my shield, killing her momentum, and cleaved my sword down. An intense, dull pain throbbed in my chin and suddenly I was staring up at the sky. My legs failed me and I fell to my knees.

Lumina came over to me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm conscious, at least. But what happened at the end there? I thought I'd won, and then I was on the ground."

"You blocked her attack splendidly, but just as you were bringing your sword down, she used the momentum from rebounding off your shield to kick into a backward somersault. And I'm afraid your chin was an ample target for her foot. You lost your balance after that."

"Oh." Yeah, that made sense. Brain damage didn't sound like fun, so I cast Heal on my head and the strength returned to my legs.

I asked for another round, but this time Elizabeth was my opponent. If Ripnear's style was pure speed and barrages of attacks, then Elizabeth's was all about counters and craftiness. She parried and deflected my attempts expertly

and never let an opening escape. Any crack in my defense was caught and kicked right through. Literally. Her patterns were so varied that I had no hope of getting an attack in unless I got smart.

I probed for an opening with a few feints, then charged her with my shield, hoping our difference in size would work in my favor.

“Unwise,” I heard, but not from in front of me. Elizabeth had vanished.

Before I could react, my legs were swept from under me and I fell forward. The gentle prod of a sword against my back signaled the end of our match.

“Um, what just happened?” I asked, bewildered. “How did Elizabeth disappear like that?”

“Her magic,” Lumina said. “Explain, if you would, Elizabeth.”

“Yes, ma’am. You see, Luciel, I have two affinities: fire and water. I used them to create an illusion, a decoy, if you will, to bait you into creating an opening.”

Not only had she used magic completely under my nose, but she had done so using diametrically opposed affinities. I had underestimated the paladins. They were in a league of their own. And not just in regards to their numerical levels, but their pure skill and refined technique as well.

“Thank you. This was an informative experience.” I lowered my head, humbled. I knew I had more to learn from them.

The three of us went on to participate in the round robin and after Lumina offered her feedback, morning training concluded.

After breakfast, the Valkyries split off into a five-versus-five match while Lumina and I observed and analyzed.

“I doubt you will ever find yourself leading troops,” she said, “but evaluating your own strategies and ascertaining the weaknesses of others could prove useful to you in other ways.”

“I pray that I’ll never have to make use of those skills.”

Once training ended, Lumina and the others left for their field exercises again while I hopped back into the saddle. However...

“My apologies; Forêt wasn’t feeling well, so I’ve brought you a different horse today,” Yanbath said.

And just like that, my plans were thwarted. Forêt’s replacement was a large chestnut.

“It sure is big,” I commented.

“Bigger than Forêt, for sure. And a tad rowdier, but you’ll not find another horse that can stand up to monsters like this one can.”

“A tough guy, huh?”

I pressed on his back to signal that I was about to mount and jumped onto the saddle. But the chestnut immediately reeled up onto his hind legs and threw me to the ground.

“Oof! Okay, that hurt!”

“Mister Luciel, are you all right?!”

“For the most part.”

I tried several more times with the same result, even after Yanbath brought out a second horse. I was an avid beater of dead horses, though, figuratively speaking, and didn’t give up. The Valkyries would never let me join their field exercises at this rate.

Dozens of times, right up until the paladins returned, I climbed onto the horses’ backs only to be flung back down to the ground. And it wasn’t soft. But I refused to let some stupid pony look down on me and declined to heal myself.

When Lumina saw me covered in dirt and bruises, she placed her hand on my shoulder and said, “perhaps we ought to hold off on field exercises for now.”

And with that, my second session with the Valkyries concluded. I headed down to the labyrinth to work up a sweat and cheer myself up.

The next morning, I woke up and did my usual stretches. No soreness, thankfully. It was time to get ready for the day.

After breakfast, I took my lunch from the usual serving lady and got straight to

labyrinth-diving. I purified skeletons and ghosts in the tenth-floor boss room left and right. Zombies weren't a match for my swordplay anymore. So I was planning on trying something new today.

I had three holy silver daggers that I'd gotten from the shop, which I had been keeping in my magic bag, and when I willed one into my left hand, it appeared there with almost no delay. I figured that would be useful if I was ever in a pinch or up against a flying enemy and needed a fast throwing weapon. That is, after I had trained enough to actually make use of it.

I was eating lunch in the cleared boss room, not a monster in sight, when a thought came to mind. "What would happen if I just stayed down here?"

It would require some investigating, so I decided to kill time for the moment and wait. I ran through my magic training routine and did some practice swings with my weapons so that I wouldn't die of boredom in the meantime, but not a single monster appeared.

"Is that how it works? With this robe and an Aura Coat for good measure, maybe I can stay down here for longer than I thought."

For three whole days, I continued to grind in the boss room, honing my new magic bag-enhanced combat style. And today, the day before my next session with the Valkyries, was the day I would be challenging the twentieth-floor boss.

I stood before the grand door and made my final preparations.

"Weapons, check. Armor, check. Recovery items, check. Area Barrier, up. Motivational Substance X, down the hatch."

It was go time. I had studied all the undead and their moves on the tenth floor, and I was ready.

"God, Buddha, ancestors, lend me your strength. And *please* let me be able to use magic this time."

The door creaked open into the same gloomy type of hall as on the tenth floor.

"Now, *this* is a boss room. I was getting a little too used to that last one."

Just like before, the door slammed shut behind me as I stepped inside. Light filled the room, revealing a wight and two armored skeleton knights. Except these weren't exactly skeletons. They were far more intimidating. These were *death* knights.

I had a bad feeling and immediately began to chant, "*Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Banish the impurities before me and shepherd them unto deliverance. Purification!*"

Radiance engulfed the beasts and swallowed them whole... Not.

"Figures."

The undead trio bellowed menacingly with a tinge of pain that didn't go unnoticed. The spell had done something but not enough. I cast it again, and the knights thrust their shields out to charge me, unfazed.

They were fast. But I kept a cool head and read their moves. The Purification spell fizzled out when it hit their shields, only slowing them slightly. I readied my sword and shield and had managed to sidestep the charge when three blood-red lances of flame came flying straight at me.

So, that's the gimmick, huh? These three were a dangerous team. This wasn't going to be pretty.

I held up my shield to block the fiery spears, and as I took the blow, an image flashed through my mind—my shield melting away in my hands.

I immediately threw it at the death knights behind me, where it promptly combusted and began to dissolve, then summoned another one from my bag. I whipped around and fired a third Purification at the death knights from close range, stopping the creatures in their tracks.

It was now or never. I approached one of the defenseless knights and rent it with my magically-imbued sword. A chill, a warning, ran down my spine. I dropped the sword at once and drew out a holy silver dagger, flinging it, full of magic, at the head of the other death knight.

If this were a fairy tale, that would be where the story ended. But neither monsters nor reality were so kind. The dagger bounced off the knight's shield with a clang.

I had to regroup and strategize, so I retreated, putting some distance between us. I'd taken one of them out, but now the remaining knight had gone into full defense mode, protecting the wight so that it could keep dishing out those unblockable flame lances.

They were an extremely powerful pair. The shield I had tossed away was lying on the ground now, molten and in flames... A fate that would have awaited my arm if I hadn't reacted quickly enough.

While my mind was occupied with the wight's magic, the knight charged me. I parried its blade, but not well and it sliced across my right shoulder. I had to do something fast or they'd back me into a corner.

"I've just gotta go for it!"

The wight shot its fire magic at me. This time, I didn't take it head-on but used my shield to deflect it at an angle then tossed the shield away and rushed the knight. Just in front of its face, I chanted, *"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Banish the impurities before me and shepherd them unto deliverance. Purification!"*

But my enemy didn't flinch and brought down its sword. I leaped to the side at the last second and summoned another dagger, throwing it in desperation. It landed cleanly in the monster's skull.

"Yes!" I cheered.

There was no time to celebrate, though. The wight still remained. But the instant I was about to look away from the knight, a red glow ignited in its eyes. Its crimson pupils darted to look right at me. Fear welled up inside of me, but I stifled it with a powerful roar. I called a sword into my hand as I lunged at it and severed its head. It didn't die immediately, leaving me with another nasty cut on my shoulder before it went. Still, I was lucky that it hadn't dismembered me.

Searing pain shot through my wounds, even after staving off the immediate danger with High Heal. I wondered if it was some sort of phantom pain, but came to a sudden realization. A casting of Purification soon numbed the aching.

Sweat dripped from my face as I gasped for breath. "Was that the curse debuff? Come on, these are supposed to be illusions," I groaned. "If my master

hadn't trained me, I would've thought the pain was real and probably passed out." I pointed my blade at the wight. "You're next! Let's do this!"

I threw up Magic Barrier and Aura Coat and concentrated. The wight was getting impatient and prepared to launch five of the flame lances towards me at once. I threw a dagger at it, then readied my third shield and charged. It dodged, but I was on top of it now.

The fiend combined all five lances into one, seemingly in a fluster, and hurled it at me. I tossed my shield out and they collided in mid-air, sending the shield flying in the opposite direction. When the smoke cleared, I found myself right in front of the monster, unharmed. I kept the pressure on, dashing towards it and casting Purification in an effort to impede its magic, but it countered with a spell of its own and enveloped itself in a black force field, something similar to Magic Barrier.

"If I can't beat it with magic, I've got plenty of sharp objects that'll do the trick!"

I sliced with my blade and it reacted with magical crimson arrows. I retaliated yet again with Area Heal. The undead were no match for healing magic and this thing clearly hadn't expected such a move. It froze in place and shrieked as the light enveloped it.

I summoned a holy silver lance and ran the creature through, then called up Brod's sword and infused it with magic. With a clean and powerful twirl, I severed the wight's head, which flew through the air in an arc and struck the floor, vanishing as it hit.

"Done," I sighed heavily. "I feel like the other wight was stronger, but working out how to handle that new magic was rough. I guess those two death knights balanced it out."

I picked up the wight's massive gem and the two smaller death knight gems, all of which were darker and larger than the normal undead remains. And just like last time, there was additional gear left behind as well: weapons, armor, jewelry, and a robe. Before stashing them in my bag, I purified each of the items. They were probably valuable, but I'd have to hand them over to the pope anyway.

Once I'd collected everything, a door leading to a flight of stairs down to the next floor rumbled open.

"No surprise there. I wonder how many floors there are, though. Things could get rough if this keeps up. But oh well, it's lunchtime."

I enjoyed resting my weary body with a nice, relaxing lunch. While I ate, I meditated and concentrated on recovering my strength and magic. After recuperating enough, I decided, "Think I'll peek at the twenty-first floor, come back and fight those knights one more time, then head home."

I reached floor twenty-one and in no time at all realized that things weren't going to be the same. Meandering zombies had been replaced by ghouls that actively sought me out and attacked. Purification still worked, but sheesh, it was terrifying. These new enemies moved at twice the speed of normal zombies, so I had a lot of reacclimating to do or I'd be in for a world of hurt.

I noted the orange coloring of the walls, then went back up to the boss room. After eliminating the sole remaining knight, I took a moment to calm myself down.

"So, the respawning knight doesn't drop items and goes down with a single Purification." I swore to myself and the gemified monster that one day I'd take it down without any magic whatsoever, even if that day was still a ways off.

My first month at the Church was nearing its end.

13 — Business Talks with the Pope

Cattleya stood at her usual counter.

“Here are today’s stones.”

“On it. I have to say, Luciel, your hard work’s really putting a dent in that debt.”

“A dent? What debt?”

“Oh, nothing...” Her smile and cheer faded when she saw the large gems at the top of the pile in my bag. “Luciel, did you go to the main chamber of the twentieth floor?”

“Yes, I did. I fought with a wight and two skeleton knights.”

“Let’s square your points away first,” she said. “That’s 215,342. Big haul this time.”

“Thanks. I’ll be sure to put them to use.”

“I hope you do.”

“Actually, I’m pooped, so if you’ll excuse me...”

Cattleya giggled. “That’s a funny joke. Unfortunately, I’m not in a joking mood.”

“O-Oh, you’re not?” I laughed nervously.

“No, I’m not. Shall we be off?”

Well, it was worth a shot. Cattleya once again escorted me to the pope’s chambers.

“Greetings, Cattleya and boy called Luciel. What urgent matter brings you this time?”

“Your Holiness,” Cattleya said, “the exorcist has progressed to the twentieth floor of the labyrinth, where he did battle with a wight and two skeleton knights. We come to report his victory.”

“Oh? Luciel, it pleases me to hear your continued descent goes smoothly.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness.”

“I find your strength curious,” the pope remarked alluringly.

“You flatter me, Your Holiness. The battle was a hard one and I only won it with luck. Without the magic bag you gave me, I would have surely been injured...or worse. I owe this victory to you.”

“Then my aid proved useful?”

“Yes, very much. Your help was the deciding factor in this fight. Of that, I’m certain.”

She chuckled. “You display such valorous and meritable acts of service in so small an amount of time and you would bestow the glory on me. You humor me, Luciel, truly.”

“I’m honored, Your Holiness.”

Cattleya had told me a million times before coming here to not get carried away and make a fool of myself. So I spoke the honest truth and nothing more.

“I would see the items you have brought,” she commanded.

“Yes, Your Holiness,” I replied. “The wight wielded both fire and holy magic. Two powerful knights protected it. They were skeletons, but much stronger than usual, as if possessed by spirits of the dead. So I’ve taken to calling them ‘death knights.’ This is what they dropped.”

I placed the wight’s garments, its two arm bracelets, and the knights’ armors, shields, and weapons in front of me. As the maidens brought each of them to their mistress, I noticed a shadow of unease on Cattleya’s face.

The pope took each item gently in her hands, examining them carefully, pensively. “It is as I expected,” she said. “Luciel, I truly owe you a great debt. The items you have collected from the wights you have slain thus far once belonged to bishops and archbishops of this church. I fear these creatures were the same individuals who went missing well over a decade ago.”

“You mean to say they died in the labyrinth, then turned on the Church in death?”

“Luciel!” Cattleya snapped. “Word your sentences carefully!”

“Indeed,” the voice behind the veil replied, ignoring the interjection, “though it would be more accurate to say that they turned against the Church, the Healer’s Guild, and the Republic of Saint Shurule in its entirety.”

I stayed silent.

“Over fifty years have passed since the formation of the labyrinth. None know what birthed it,” she explained. “These halls once bustled with life, the scribbling of pens, the marching of templars and paladins, but that was the past, of which the present is a mere shadow.”

My private quarters were clearly intended for two people originally, and now I finally understood why. All this pomp and circumstance was likely meant to boost my motivation and lead into giving me the next key item for clearing the dungeon. Although there was probably some truth mixed in. The pope’s voice sounded so young, I was having trouble believing she’d been alive over fifty years ago. The veil that she hid behind made it hard to judge, though.

“When the labyrinth was formed, many brave souls endeavored to seal it off. It is thanks to their efforts that we have stayed the tide of undead thus far.”

“It can be sealed?”

“It can,” she said. “To the best of my knowledge, traversing it in its entirety is the method through which this would be achieved. However, none have succeeded. Countless spells and alternatives have been attempted to no avail.”

“I can see how that would be troublesome.”

“In so many words. At its very depths, there lies a core, the source of the miasma, and destroying it is the answer. Only then will the labyrinth cease to function, and once it is sealed, the impurities will gradually dissipate until the dungeon itself vanishes.”

“The entire labyrinth will disappear?”

“Indeed. The seat of the Church cannot coexist with such a place, for they are nests of magical energy, miasma, and avarice. I trust you understand the weight of this matter.”

“Yes, very much so,” I agreed, although to be honest, it wasn’t surprising in the least.

To earn a profit was not inherently evil, but a labyrinth near an organization that deceived and put people’s lives in danger couldn’t have been a coincidence, not when there were corrupt clinics and healers being ignored. The church’s complacency was as good as encouraging such corruption.

“If I may return to the past, many brave souls sought to eliminate the labyrinth upon its emergence. A great many elite templars and paladins ventured into its depths.”

If they were anything like Lumina, I imagined they must have made good time.

She went on, “Their progress was swift, descending five to seven floors in a single day. But just as quickly, the stench and miasma began to take their toll and their march slowed.”

I, on the other hand, was just fine with it all. Was this some roundabout way of calling me a weirdo again? It had to have been bad if not even the elites could make significant headway. Like an internal struggle for power or something. Whatever the case, one look at the desolate dining hall was proof enough that whatever had happened back then had left the Church quite short on manpower.

“The knights marched ever deeper in the name of the Church,” she recounted. “Yet as the miasma thickened, some fell to its sickness, some to powerful foes, and many to the hands of their allies, who were deluded by the monsters’ mind magic.” Wraiths came to mind. Or maybe it had been something even stronger. If so, I didn’t envy them. “Their ill-fated journey led to many sacrifices. And so, they sealed the entrance, hoping to forestall a deluge of monsters. One day, however, there were reports of zombies clambering from the labyrinth. This is when construction to expand the palace began.”

“I think I’m starting to understand why healers, out of all the classes, are the ones working as exorcists.”

“Some decades ago, those born with the class of paladin or templar were not so uncommon. But as of late, such people are rare. Even rarer are the ones who

choose to cast their lot with the Church. Our numbers are simply too few.”

“So, you rely on the Purification spell to thin them out in lieu of raw strength.”

“Precisely. At present, our most pressing concern is seeing that monsters do not escape to the surface.”

Oh, was that a hint? Maybe she was telling me not to focus solely on clearing the dungeon, but also to patrol the higher floors. Would I find rare drops by reclearing them?

“I understand,” I said. “Do you know how far down the first excursion went? Or how deep the labyrinth goes? Any information you have would be helpful.”

“My reports indicate that they slew the fiend of the fortieth floor, but at the cost of the lives of two commanders. And so they deemed their struggle lost.”

“How did these knights compare to the paladins who are here now?”

“They were powerful indeed. Their era was one of war and strife and they were the chosen few who saw us through times of crises.”

“Wow...” By the sound of it, the fortieth-floor boss could’ve been as strong as my master. And I didn’t like that one bit. “I apologize if this is rude, but were you not able to commission adventurers to conquer the labyrinth for you?”

“Such an option was discussed at the time, but they were unable to enter,” the pope explained. “We would later discover that entry is only permitted to those with the light or holy magic affinities, or those of the acolyte, mystic, hero, paladin, templar, or dragoon classes.”

“Um, did the hero you tested that theory out with not manage anything at all?”

“As misfortune would have it, the instant the hero entered the labyrinth, demons invaded and our affairs no longer took precedence. I have heard rumors that the battle robbed him of his strength and powers thereafter.”

How convenient. This hero guy didn’t sound very heroic. And it wasn’t even against the big, bad demon king? Just regular demons?

“I see. What about the people the wights used to be?” I asked. “Why did they go into the labyrinth?”

“They were capable individuals, if lacking in frugality and temperance as you may have surmised from their belongings. I suspect riches were their aim.”

“That’s unfortunate.” Their greed had destined them to become wights. Wait, this *was* still all bogus exposition, right? I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more truth here than I was giving them credit for.

“That is all I know of the labyrinth and its nature. Tell me, Luciel, would a party to join in your mission lessen your hardships?” she offered.

“I suppose it would, but they would have to be as resistant to stench, illusions, charms, and other mind-affecting magic as I am.”

She paused for a moment. “I do hope you are cautious of your limits. Is it truly feasible for you to best this dungeon alone?”

“Yes, I believe it is, as long as I pace myself.”

“And what, pray tell, would you require to accomplish this?”

Well, I hadn’t been expecting a reward, that was for sure. “If I may, I would request specialized anti-undead weapons and armor. Anything that could help me survive.”

“Very well. I shall prepare several items.”

“I’m grateful. One last thing... You’re certain there were no reports of monsters other than undead in the labyrinth?” This was the only big “what-if” for me. If Purification ever stopped working, I’d be in for it.

“I am. Is this a concern of yours?” Unease tinged her voice.

“Not particularly, no,” I said. “Cleansing magic wasn’t enough to defeat the wight and its death knights, so I was curious. If I ever come across monsters other than the undead, conquering this labyrinth could be problematic.”

“Hm, it is possible the priests simply dispatched any they encountered in the past. Their levels were quite high.”

And I was still level one. My job and Holy Magic levels were meaningless in that regard. “Right. So please, don’t place all your hopes of overcoming this labyrinth on me alone.”

“I understand. But I apologize, Luciel, for I must ask you to delve deeper nonetheless,” the voice breathed with remorse. “Ah, and do meet with me once your healer level reaches six so that I may promote you. I will always make time to hear from you.”

“A promotion?” There was no mention of that in my god-given knowledge.

“Indeed. One’s job level increases through years of focused effort and experience,” she said, “and once level six is reached, one can be promoted. Certain occupations can only be taken upon attaining level ten, the maximum, but I know of none who have chosen to be promoted at so late a stage.”

So, I could elevate my job to a more advanced class, essentially? “Can you be promoted multiple times?”

“That is impossible. Only ancient texts speak of such an ability. You would also do well to note that only the king, emperor, and mystic jobs possess the power to promote another.”

“Thank you for the information. If I could ask one more question, is this different from multi-classing?” That had been an option while I was in limbo after my death.

“Multi-classing refers to those unfortunate few who possess multiple jobs. It is said they are burdened with exceptionally slow growth rates.”

Then it was a good thing I hadn’t gone that route. Unless it was something like a long-term investment with a bigger payout.

“Has it been researched?”

“At a sluggish pace. Multi-classers are a rare few and their fate is believed to be a divinely ordained trial.”

I nodded. “I understand.”

“I have told you all I am able to now, and I commend your successes, Luciel. I will gather the items I promised and entrust them to Cattleya. One of my retainers will see you out. Cattleya, remain.”

“Allow me, Your Holiness,” one of the maidens offered.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me,” I said.

“I anticipate great things from you.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

My second audience with the pope came to a close.

14 — Saint Weirdo is Born

The pope's servant escorted me back to my usual area, then I made my way to the dining hall from there. It was still a little early for dinner, but there were people everywhere. I hopped into the back of the line and was thinking about ordering an extra helping today, when a voice pulled me from my thoughts.

"Luciel, join us over there once you have your meal."

I knew who it was before even turning around. "Hello, Miss Lumina. Thanks, I'd love to."

"We'll be waiting."

Those around us didn't take kindly to our acquaintance and showered me with prickly, cold glares. Evidently, Lumina and her Valkyries were a popular bunch. The glaring was a little depressing, though.

"Good afternoon. I'll have a large—no, extra-large serving, please. Oh, and today's lunch was delicious, as always."

"Oh, Luciel, you charmer. I'll whip that right up for you."

The glares from around the room shifted to my meal. It was a mountain of food that could have fed anyone else five times over. I quickly made for Lumina's table to escape the attention.

"You're all here together? I don't see that often," I commented.

"There have been incidents on the borders of Illumasia, Luburk, and Shurule," Lumina said. "Unfortunately, we're being deployed along with the templar unit."

"Meaning?"

"I apologize, but we will have to suspend our training. Our grounds will, of course, remain open for you to practice your horsemansh—ahem, your horse riding."

Wow, okay, so what I do doesn't even count as horsemanship. Lumina had

always been a bit oblivious when it came to unabashedly insulting me, but it hurt just the same.

“Got it. And I know you’re all strong, but please be careful out there.”

“I’m more worried about how you’re going to get on without us,” Marluka said ominously.

“Um, what?”

“She’s gotta point, pal,” Gannet added. “Folks aren’t too happy about the time you’ve been spending with us.”

“I guess that’s true.” Now that I thought about it, being on good terms with an entire regiment of beautiful paladins wasn’t a good look. Jord, Granhart, and Yanbath were the only men I’d spoken to while here at HQ. It was like I was being avoided.

“They’ve always got their eyes on you.” *Beatrice, you’re scaring me.*

“Rest in peace.” *Kathy, slow your roll.*

“You guys are jumping to conclusions. I doubt anyone would actually get violent over something like this,” I said, unconcerned. The entire table heaved a mysterious sigh.

“You really need to get better at reading people,” Ripnear chided me.

“But would an attentive Luciel truly be Luciel?” Elizabeth had come to my defense...I think.

“I’ll visit your grave when you die.” Queena had reached her own conclusions, apparently.

“I will avenge you.” And Myla was disturbing me. Could she not, say, *defend* me instead? Why was vengeance the only option?

“I hope you’ve got fast legs,” Lucy remarked, holding her fist up.

“Where am I even supposed to run to?”

“Hmm, well they can’t follow you into the labyrinth, so why not hide out there?” *So, my usual schedule, then. Thanks, Lucy.*

“Ladies, quit making light of matters,” Lumina reprimanded.

“Do *you* have any advice for me?”

She looked away.

“Hey, least he’s got balls. I bet he’s got enough stones to protect his family jewels.” There was Saran’s trademark raunchiness, but I failed to see what these “stones” had to do with keeping me alive.

“Saran, how can your words be so vulgar yet your room so feminine and elegant? Honestly, you sound like a drunk at a pub.”

“Shut it, Elizabeth! I don’t wanna hear that from someone who lives in a pigsty, miss prim and proper.”

“Oh, you’ve done it now. I hope you’re prepared for the consequences of revealing a maiden’s secrets.”

“Now, now, you two. You’re causing a lot of collateral damage here,” Lucy intervened.

Finally remembering that I was there, the two women sat back down, red in the face. They continued to glare at each other, but I wasn’t touching that with a ten-foot pole.

“Anyhow, if you’ve lost your edge by the time we return, we’ll remedy that whether you like it or not, so I hope you’ll continue to apply yourself,” Lumina said.

“I will. And I’m praying your journey is a safe and short one.”

I had many worries inside me, but among them was a new determination stirred by Lumina’s words.

We chatted for a while as we ate then parted ways. First, I decided to take some of their advice to heart and ordered heaps of extra food for later. Without the Valkyries, the labyrinth really did seem like the safest place to be. Then I had an errand to run before heading back to my room. I was low on Substance X, so I was off to the Adventurer’s Guild.

The instant I walked into the guildhall, my stupid robe attracted snarls and glowers from every corner.

I made a beeline for the dining hall where the guildmaster tended to be. I was met with much the same welcome in the mess and went straight to the stout man at the counter.

“Hello, there.”

“Well hell, ya actually drank that muck.” He frowned. “What’s with the getup, kid?”

“Isn’t it lame? I’m required to wear it, apparently. So, I wanted to bulk order some food, if that’s okay. And extra barrels of Substance X too, please.”

The guildmaster gaped at me along with practically everyone in the room. “You pullin’ my leg?”

“No, sir. I’m going on an...expedition, let’s call it, so I’d like to add seven barrels, to be exact. Ten in all.”

“You’re the boss. Now...” he hesitated. “You’re the Masochist Zombie Healer, yeah? I’ve got a favor... No, a request for ya. Wouldja hear me out?”

“That depends on the kind of request it is, I suppose.”

“I want you ta do whatcha did at Merratoni.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can,” I said. “I work at headquarters, so I can’t live here.”

“What about just the healin’ part?”

His face was sullen. I was worried that if I denied him, he might ban me from the premises, but there was surely no harm in accepting a request as an adventurer.

“First of all, you’re kind of scaring me. And I’m still technically an adventurer, so as long as it’s an official request, I think we can make something work.”

It was a reasonable compromise. And to be honest, although my attachment to the adventurers in this city was nonexistent, it didn’t change the fact that I owed a lot to the guild itself and to the people who had taken care of me. By lending a hand to adventurers in need, maybe, just maybe, I could repay a little of what Brod had done for me.

I suddenly noticed that the hall was quieter today. Just as I was wondering where everyone had gone, I saw what looked to be a casualty being carried down into the basement.

“Ya mean it?! Just sit tight, I’ll getcha that substance. What about the food? Didja need that right away?”

“Just the Substance X for now, thanks. I’d like you to refill the barrels I’ve got with me too.”

“You got it!”

The guildmaster vanished into the back of the kitchen. I called a waitress over while I waited. It was a different woman from the one I’d met during my first visit.

“Can I take your order?” she asked.

“Oh, no, it’s just been a while since I was last here and I noticed everyone seems really on edge. Did something happen?”

“You could say that. The adventurers have been having a rough time of it fighting the particularly strong monsters that are popping up lately.”

Strange. I’d heard that powerful monsters were uncommon in Shurule, especially near the capital. “I’m sorry to hear that. Is that why the guildmaster was looking so serious?”

“The adventurers here are like family to him. You can hardly blame him for his sour mood after so many have been injured.” She smiled, but there was no joy behind it. All I felt from her was anger.

“Can’t the clinics do anything?” I asked. As long as it was nothing serious, they had to have been able to help out.

“You would have them take their wounded to a clinic, only to be charged Crya knows how much gold?” she growled. “What are we to you, slaves?!”

I froze up. I’d never felt such vitriolic hatred from someone I had just met. The people’s resentment of healers was obviously not unique to Merratoni, but how had my simple question incited such rage? Unless there were people like Bottaculli even here in the Holy City... At the very least, I had to defend myself.

“No, of course not. I never meant to imply that.”

“Mirlina! Knock it off!” cried the guildmaster with perfect timing, carrying in my barrels of Substance X.

“But sir,” she protested, “this boy is telling us to do business with clinics!” Her icy, loathsome glare didn’t feel very nice.

“Don’t make me have ta explain everything,” he said to her dismissively, then turned to me. “Will ya take our request?”

“I don’t come cheap,” I declared. “It’ll cost one silver per patient. And I want your support if the pope, the Valkyrie Paladin Regiment, or I are ever in need. Also, you *have* to do something about my nickname. Those are my terms.”

My alias was starting to stick and I would have vastly preferred something cooler sounding than “Masochist” or “Zombie Healer.” I heard that Gulgar shared in my pain when he’d gotten his: the Bear Chef. “I ain’t a bear-man, I’m a wolf-man, dammit!” he’d cry. But alas...

“Done.” He slammed a mug of Substance X on the counter. “Chug this down and our contract’s official. I’ll gather the injured downstairs for ya.”

I wasn’t sure how this garbage constituted the solidification of a binding contract, but whatever. I hadn’t had any after dinner, so no harm done. I gulped it down and heaved a hearty sigh.

“There. Now, let’s see those patients. Oh, first I should store these barrels. Don’t want them to start smelling.” I counted all ten and stashed them inside my magic bag.

“Is that a...” The guildmaster trailed off, looking surprised at the sight of my rare item. “Forget it. Follow me.”

A good idea, considering my Church robe was liable to spark some fires.

We descended into the training grounds, which had been converted into a makeshift field hospital. Those who noticed my robe shot looks of intense hatred at me. Or no, they weren’t directed at me, specifically. They were directed at the robe and what it represented.

Things got heated quickly.

“What the hell’re *you* doing here, you goddamn money-grubber!”

“You and your kind can go straight to hell!”

“Get out of here!”

“Someone smash his head in!”

Adventurers from all over the room hurled threats and insults at me. I was, to be honest, *absolutely terrified*. Back in Merratoni, Nanaella and Monica had been my respite, my allies. They had given me the drive to push on. Those two and the general friendly crowd that surrounded me there. But I could never live in a place like this. I desperately wanted to leave.

“Quiet, you morons!” the guildmaster bellowed. Silence fell at once. “This kid, no, this *man* is the legendary Masochist Zombie of Merratoni. He’s here to heal your sorry asses for a silver each and if you wanna complain about it then you can get the hell out of my guildhall!”

Before I could feel sufficiently offended by that introduction, murmurs began to rise up around the room.

“The Zombie Healer?”

“He’s kinda cute. You’re telling me he’s a bottom?”

“I thought he was just an urban legend!”

“What sage would heal people for a silver each?”

“Hey, look alive! If that’s really him, we might be saved!”

“We believe in you, Sir Zombie! Please, heal us!”

Cheers of “zombie this” and “masochist that” shook the very floor I stood on. And boy was I unhappy about it. That damn guildmaster was out to get me.

Wait... This was my chance. First impressions were everything.

“I have no intention of stealing business from my fellow healers,” I announced. “I’m only here on an errand to pick up some Substance X. It was pure coincidence. So don’t expect me to be here every time you need me. I know the clinics’ prices may be high, but please don’t resort to violence or

conflict.” I looked over the crowd. “I will heal you for one silver each. If the pope, Valkyrie Paladin Regiment, or I am ever in need, I will expect your support. Lastly, you will not refer to me as ‘zombie’ or ‘masochist.’ I want a nickname I can be proud of. Understand? Good. Patients with serious injuries, please gather in one place and I’ll begin.”

The adventurers quickly divided themselves by severity of injury. In the meantime, I checked my skills and was met with a surprise. I’d expected it to take me at least another half-year, but my Holy Magic skill was now up to eight. I couldn’t help but wonder if the god of healing was on my side, then got to work.

“Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Take my energy for an angelic breath and mend the beings of this realm. Area High Heal!”

As the chant left my lips, I felt my magical energy slip away. I carefully controlled its flow, tuned it, and let it gently trickle outward. Those around me were enveloped in a soft, blue light. Their bodies began to glow and their wounds closed up. Gashes resealed, bones reset themselves by mechanisms unknown. A few seconds later, the light faded and the adventurers’ wounds had vanished.



I sighed. "There. Who's next?"

"Hey, hurry up and get the next ones over here," the guildmaster ordered, looking a little flustered.

I ignored his strange behavior. The Healing came first. Once all the patients in immediate danger had been dealt with, I could afford some breaks, which allowed me to finish off the rest of the patients with another Area High Heal. There were some who were poisoned and I cured them as well, on the house.

Unfortunately, no matter what I tried, I couldn't reform lost eyes or regrow dismembered limbs. But not a single person reproached me.

Once the healing was done, whispers of my new alias could be heard through the calm.

"So, Masochist Zombie's out."

"Guess he doesn't like it."

"Well, what else is he? A sage? He's a healer, after all."

"This is a tough one. He keeps fighting, no matter the odds. So maybe he's into combat?"

"What about the Combat Medic?"

"Nah, doesn't sound right. He's always helpin' people for cheap, so how's about the Bargain Healer?"

"Sure, if you want the Healer's Guild on his ass."

"Masochist Zombie just rolls off the tongue, y'know? It's hard to one-up."

"He's a swell guy, ain't he? We could call him Sir Saint."

"He's just a kid. That feels too lofty."

"Well, he's always drinking garbage. The Misfit Healer?"

"That's not much different from calling him a masochist."

"Okay, so he's saintlike but also weird. What about Saint Weirdo?"

"That's it!" they cried together.

“My heart’s still set on Masochist Zombie, though.”

“True,” they agreed together.

I, meanwhile, rather angrily collected my pay among cries of “zombie” and “masochist.” But I was just about spent, magically, so I let them know I’d be back tomorrow to collect the food I had ordered, and was on my way out after downing another mug of Substance X when a cheer began. “Saint Weirdo” was their call.

With a new nickname to contend with, disdain in my heart, and tears on my face, I made a vow to myself and the moon above. One day, I’d be strong. Strong enough to set these adventurers and their twisted naming senses right.

Chapter 3: A Stone Best Left Unturned

01 — OP Equipment and a Full Stomach

The day after the hubbub at the Adventurer's Guild, a grand procession was held to see off the knights. Crowds of people had gathered and they drowned their heroes in a cacophony of cheers. Much to the Valkyries' and templars' surprise, many of those cheers consisted of phrases like "Be as Sir Zombie," or "Sir Masochist," or even "Saint Weirdo."

Lumina and her regiment spotted me from horseback, and with fearless smiles they departed from the Holy City.

"Man, I told them to knock it off with the nicknames," I grumbled. "Oh well."

I wandered around to a few places for food, then stopped by the Adventurer's Guild to grab the provisions I'd ordered. After picking up the last of my supplies from the HQ dining hall, I made for the labyrinth.

Cattleya was standing in front of the counter, reading a book. "Good morning," she greeted me. "Late start today?"

"Something like that. I was at the procession, seeing off the Valkyries."

"Going back into the labyrinth, then? You'll be back around the same time as usual, I assume."

"No, I'll be down there a bit longer this time. I hear the people around HQ don't like me much, so I'm thinking about hiding out for a bit."

"You know I can't let you do something that dangerous."

"But the only reason I even go back to my room is to sleep," I argued. "And I've got plenty of food in my bag. I'm totally set."

"I'm not worried about your nutrition, Luciel," she sighed.

"I'll be fine. The main chambers are perfectly safe from monsters once I take

out the ones that are already there.”

“Conceit will get you killed.”

“That’s exactly why I’m going down there. I’ve made some potentially lethal enemies by getting close to the Valkyries. This way I can disappear and be safe.”

“Fine,” she conceded, “but I want to see you back up here at least once a week. The items you pestered Her Holiness for should be here soon.”

I wondered what they could be. My expectations were high, considering who they were coming from. “Got it.”

“Don’t die, okay?”

“Don’t worry, that’s my motto. I’ll see you in a week.”

“Be safe.”

I stepped down into the labyrinth and immediately cast Aura Coat, then made quick work of the first floor. By the time I reached the tenth-floor boss room, my stomach was calling for a lunch break. Seeing Lumina and the girls off had taken some time, so it was already the afternoon.

“I can’t believe I managed to run all the way here. Look at me go.”

I purified the room, had my meal and usual mugful, and went straight down to floor twenty after a short break.

“Dammit!” I winced. *“Oh holy hand of healing. Banish the impurities before me. Purification!”*

A large chunk of magic slipped away from me with the shortened chant, but the death knight was defeated all the same. When I *did* win against this thing, I won by a landslide. If I slipped up even once, though, things got messy. I had a long way to go.

“Phew, I’m starving. Think it’s dinner time.” I took some of the food I’d bought in town out of my bag. Then I realized it sure would’ve been convenient if I had stashed a table to eat at too.

Given the dungeon's oppressive atmosphere, the warm meal soothed my soul. I'd made the right choice stocking up on food from several places for maximum variety. After supper and a few more rounds with the death knight, I was starting to get sleepy. I purified the boss room, cast another Aura Coat, and put some barrels of Substance X around for good measure before hitting the hay.

I awoke to an unfamiliar ceiling—wait, it was just the labyrinth's. I shot up, but nothing had changed. The room was exactly as I'd left it. The only thing that shocked me was how well I'd slept in a place like this. On a cold stone floor, at that.

I glanced around the area, but there were no signs of any monsters, and I sensed nothing out of the ordinary. The purification from the previous night was holding. After a good breakfast, I fought with the death knight one last time, then began my exploration of floor twenty-one.

"Ghouls were bad enough, but now there're mummies?"

Purification remained as effective as always, but these new enemies were a far cry from what I was used to. I was just about at my wit's end, and the lower floors getting increasingly bigger didn't help. Still, I carried on. It took everything I had, but just as my stomach began to growl, I finally finished mapping the floor.

"No traps, from the looks of it. Time to head back." I quickly returned to the ascending staircase and set some Substance X down at the foot of it to see if the monsters would chase me. Lo and behold, none of them did. "What *is* this stuff?"

I stashed the OP liquid back in my bag and went up the stairs to the boss room, ignoring the undead now shambling towards me. Once I'd finished off the death knight yet again, it was lunchtime. Then I let him respawn so that I could tango with him one-on-one, no magic.

As long as the death knight didn't reach my vitals or amputate one of my limbs, I was confident I could heal myself right back up. The pain was fine;

welcome, in fact. I was used to it from my fights with Brod and it was an effective teacher. But when I thought back on the mutilated adventurers I hadn't been able to heal the other day, I knew I had to draw a line somewhere. If things got dicey, I'd fall back on my magic, but only then.

Over the next two days, I completed my exploration of the twenty-second and twenty-third floors, in spite of the less-than-comforting monsters that stood in my path. And on the sixth day, marking a full week in the depths, I returned to the shop as promised. I didn't want to add Cattleya to my list of enemies.

I emerged from the dungeon, and there she was in her place at the shop counter.

"I'm back," I announced. "Here are the stones I got."

"Thank goodness you're all right. And good thing you came back early. I've got some weapons, armor, and other magic items for you."

It appeared that I was a day off. I hadn't checked the clock on my status screen, so I must have lost track of time.

"Was I only in there for five days? My internal clock must be out of whack. I guess it worked out for the best, though."

After converting my magic stones to points, Cattleya explained the functions of each of my new items:

A familiar-looking mithril sword, sensitive to magic and especially potent against the undead when combined with holy magic, and a mithril spear with similar properties.

An evilbane shield: a dark magic-resistant shield infused with light and repulsive to the undead.

The armor worn by all paladins, imbued with light and resistant to dark magic. It was insulated against miasma, lightweight, well-ventilated, and allowed for a free range of motion.

Sage's gauntlets, which reduced magic consumption by one-third and increased magic power by twenty percent.

A pair of misleadingly-named earth boots, which were in fact very light, yet harder than iron when infused with magic. A desperately sought-after item for any warrior.

An Angel's Pillow, said to bring deep and peaceful slumber and soothe the fatigue of any user. The monster-repelling light magic waves that it emitted protected against nightmares.

"The weapons are one thing, but everything here is just incredible," I breathed, ogling the gifts. "It's all for me? Why is there so much?"

"Because people are expecting things of you," Cattleya replied. "Although, if I'm being honest, part of it is because you're the first healer who's ever been able to equip these items in the first place. We've had them for ages, stashed away and waiting for someone who could finally conquer the labyrinth to claim them."

"Couldn't a paladin or templar use the evilbane shield or sage's gauntlets?"

"Not exactly. There's a particular prerequisite to using those."

"Like what?"

"Oh, forget the details. Try them on, why don't you?" she urged.

"If you say so." I did as I was told.

"My, don't you look sharp. I'm glad you've met the conditions to equip everything."

"You mentioned that earlier," I said.

"I did. One of the requirements for using these is having defeated over a thousand undead enemies," she explained. "Another is having one of your skills above a certain level."

How were those prerequisites being judged? Who was standing there with a gavel, deciding who could and couldn't wear certain kinds of armor? Those were probably questions best left alone.

"Wow, that sounds tough."

“So,” she said, changing the subject, “what are your plans for today?”

“I’m heading back down. But first, I’d like to buy as many throwing daggers as I can, please.”

“You worry me sometimes, Luciel,” she muttered as she handed me ten holy silver daggers.

“I’ll be careful. You know, the main chambers are oddly comfortable once everything’s been purified.”

“Now, that’s a discovery. Just stay safe. The smell of that place alone has caused too many casualties.”

“I’ll come right back if I start feeling unwell.”

“And I want to see you here again within the week,” she insisted.

“Roger. Could you thank Her Holiness for me next time you see her?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I’m off.”

“Come back safe.”

I jogged down to the tenth floor at a brisk pace, making swift work of the monsters along the way with my new equipment. That night, I made the boss room my bedroom, and the next morning I all but ran to the twentieth floor.

Out of all the items I’d received, my very favorite had secretly become the Angel’s Pillow.

Lumina — The Captain of the Valkyries

My name is Luminalia Arcs Francisque. I was born into this world as the second daughter to Earl Francisque of the dukedom of Blanche with a silver spoon in my mouth. My father belonged to a faction, and when I was nine, I was betrothed to his superior's—the marquis's—heir.

I was a docile child, I chose to believe, and when I wasn't engaging in lessons of etiquette or matters of state, I very much enjoyed reading. Most children became an adult at the age of fifteen, upon their coming-of-age ceremony. That was not so for the aristocracy, however. Our upbringing was to be decided efficiently and at a young age.

And so, with my twelfth birthday, my world was changed when the Goddess Crya bestowed upon me, at my own ceremony, a job: paladin.

Paladins were people with great strength, often accompanied by an affinity for holy or light magic, or perhaps even both. They were superior to warriors, healers, and mages in all respects. Some became paladins after attaining level six in their original class, then participating in a ceremony with a king, emperor, or mystic, but to be born one was rare indeed. It was a fine job. But I did not rejoice. Because I knew the truth. My parents, though they smiled for me, surely wept in their hearts.

The next day, my father informed me that I would depart for the Holy City of the Republic of Saint Shurule when I came of age, where I would join the Church. My betrothal was canceled, and my parents quickly lost interest in me.

Most paladins became knights of their homeland at adulthood, the age of fifteen. But this was a liberty afforded only to men of the nobility or commoners. I was not allowed the privilege of such a choice. It was my punishment, the burden I bore for being blessed with an appanage beyond that of my fiancé.

My life quickly changed. Lessons in decorum became combat training. Time I once spent crafting or painting was now spent in the saddle. The stories I loved reading became a collection of grimoires. At fourteen, one year sooner than

was customary as the marquis's patience began to wear thin, I was sent off to the Church and joined the paladins, where finally my very name fell victim to the change and I became "Lumina."

I held the tales of heroes and mystics, of sages and paladins from my youth, close to my heart. And although I would not call myself a moralist, I was a woman of principle and devoted myself to the service of the people. I wanted to be like the paladins I so often read about, to hold my chin high and live proudly. It didn't matter that I'd been driven from my home.

The Church proved a difficult reality to endure, however. Men bribed and earned their reputations as money-grubbers well. They vied for power by way of coin. I witnessed the destruction of many lives at their hands. The Church headquarters turned out to be a veritable den of thieves.

I was fear-stricken and cried many times. But paladins stood above healers and templars, so none of these villains held sway over me. I vowed to better myself, and my captain, Lady Catherine, stood with me.

Then, when at last I reached adulthood, a second ceremony was held for me, and Lady Crya blessed me with new sight. Magical affinity, an individual's very nature, became visible to me. I dubbed this ability "Aura Sight." It came with no physically distinctive traits, so none would know of it. Mastering this power became my driving force.

At the age of eighteen, Lady Catherine Frena, the Captain of the Guard, summoned me.

"Follow me," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am."

I accompanied her to the pope's very chambers.

"Catherine, do you truly intend to withdraw from the guard?" Her Holiness asked.

"I do, Your Holiness," my captain replied. "My inability to lead the knights is the direct cause of the injustices that plague the paladins. Someone must be held accountable or the cycle will continue."

“The ones at fault have been sent to the labyrinth and dealt with. You are not among them.”

“That won’t be enough to purge the rot from the Church, Your Holiness.”

My breath caught in my throat. I could scarcely believe my ears. Lady Catherine? Withdrawing from the guard? She commanded the paladins, the templars, the entirety of the Church’s knights. The pope had granted her a surname for a reason, an honor bestowed upon a rare few, even among the greatest bishops. Only through immense effort and achievement would one be appointed such a title by Her Holiness. And Lady Catherine was one such person. Words could not describe the shock I felt at hearing her decision.



“To that end, I have a request,” my captain said.

“What is it? You know that I would grant most any wish of yours.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness. What I ask is to split the templars and paladins into eight.”

“Why is that?” the other asked hesitantly.

“If we wish to cleanse the rot, I must step down from center stage. That way, the corrosion can be wiped clean without soiling our own hands.”

“Oh?”

“By splitting the knights into eight branches, we will limit their ability to move in the shadows,” Lady Catherine went on. “We can prevent young talent such as Lumina from becoming victims of abuse by leaders who wield their power of seniority wantonly.”

“And how would you accomplish this?”

“I already have six candidates in mind to captain three templar and three paladin regiments, Your Holiness.”

“Did I mistake you? I thought there would be eight in total.”

“Indeed,” she said, “but would *earning* the remaining titles not lend more weight to the new leaders?”

“You mean to...” The pope tapered off.

“Yes. I mean to test our knights’ abilities in a combat tournament. And I intend to judge every match and ensure that it is fair and proper. Once the eight regiment captains have been chosen, I will concentrate the rot into two of the units.”

“You would be risking the very existence of the Church.”

“Indeed I would. And I am prepared to lay down my life to see this corruption rooted out.”

Her Holiness paused. “Very well.”

“Lastly, all I ask of you is that Lumina’s regiment, when she wins her title, be

made of only women. If at all possible, Your Holiness.”

“I will make it so. Go with my hopes, Catherine.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness.”

Lady Catherine led me from the chamber, the confusion still plain on my face.

“Lady Catherine, I’m not so sure about this,” I said nervously. “I could never win a tournament!”

She chuckled. “That’s nonsense and you know it. All I need from you is your best. The fate of the Church depends on it.”

“But I...”

“I know you, Lumina,” she interrupted. “I know how kind and timid you are. And I know of your special gift. So I’m ordering you: be a captain.”

“How do you know about my sight?” I asked in shock.

“When I first enlisted, I knew someone with the same ability. The ability to see auras, to read magical pulses, anticipate your opponent’s moves, and evade their spells. You two fight alike. I’m also aware that overuse exhausts you terribly.”

“Where are they now?”

“Gone,” she said. “They, along with several other knights, fell to the greedy and corrupt.”

“I’m... I’m sorry,” I said quietly. The Church had disappointed me yet again.

“Lumina.” Lady Catherine brought me back. “Please, help me return the Church to a place of nobility and virtue again. Help me punish the corrupt. It can’t be done without your strength.”

“Please, no more of that!” I insisted. “Okay. I’ll do my best; I promise.”

I was stricken. How dignified she was, even with a lowered head.

One month later, I emerged victorious in the tournament and became captain of the Valkyrie Paladin Regiment. With five women under my command, we traveled the land. A year passed and our unit became eleven. It was then that I

spotted a timid yet vibrant, brilliant pulse of magic on the outskirts of Merratoni. The source of it was a young man.

My days as captain of the Valkyries, fourth paladin regiment of the Church of Saint Shurule Headquarters, were busy. Our duties consisted primarily of surveillance and elimination of the Church's enemies. Meanwhile, Captain Catherine—now under the alias of Cattleya—attended to finances and relations. I'd met with her recently, and she had softened since her time as captain, having become more feminine. I admired the Lady Catherine of the past and strove to emulate her dignified and elegant way of speaking, much to the enjoyment of my regiment as I did not often do so eloquently. I regularly relayed information to her upon returning from deployments, but she was missing a crucial piece, the key to exposing the Church's corruption.

"Oh, if only someone would conquer this labyrinth already," she lamented to herself.

There were not many whom Lady Cattleya trusted. Among them was the famously stone-faced Granhart, but there were few others. I presumed her mutterings were caused by the new exorcist healer who would be replacing the current labyrinth exterminator (a matter overseen by Granhart).

"Lady Cattleya, my Valkyries and I can make quick work of this dungeon," I declared, attempting to lessen her burden.

"Don't try it, Lumina. You wouldn't make it. Not even I would."

"That isn't like you," I argued. "You cleared Crya knows how many labyrinths in Grandol. Am I wrong?"

"This one is different. All you'll find down there are the undead, and nothing but undead," she countered.

Walking corpses... I couldn't bring myself to imagine the stench.

"I swear we can do it. I know we can."

Lady Cattleya shook her head. "It's been there for over fifty years, and no one's managed it in that time. The knights of the past who tried weren't the do-nothings of today, either, and not even they could conquer it. Dark magic is

everywhere down there.”

“You can’t mean that some went mad, can you?”

“Records show many casualties caused by their own allies. No one without some resistance to those types of spells or an affinity with light or holy magic is going to make it through.”

“Does such a hero even exist?” I murmured. Then, “I’m sorry, Lady Cattleya, I spoke out of turn.”

“Oh, stop. I hear the new exorcist is coming from Merratoni.”

“Merratoni? I don’t recall seeing anyone there who would suit the job when I last visited. Two years ago, that is.”

“He’s a strange one, I hear,” she said. “He’s never worked at a clinic before and spent all his time there training at an Adventurer’s Guild instead.”

I was stunned. “Someone blessed with power from the Goddess Crya would rather go adventuring than make use of his divine gift? What was the Merratoni branch thinking?”

“That same boy raised his Holy Magic skill to level five in *a single year*. They’re calling him a prodigy. Of course, some call him a rebel, plus a few other unsavory nicknames.”

He had trained in holy magic at an Adventurer’s Guild? Lady Cattleya grinned, evidently enjoying my befuddlement. But who would... The silver-haired boy.

“Is this healer a young boy, tall, somewhat spindly? With silver hair?”

“I’m not sure. I do know that when he registered with the guild, he couldn’t use a single spell.”

“I...think I know who he is.”

“What’s he like?” she asked.

“His aura was very pure. I sensed trepidation in him but also strength.”

“Goodness, it’s rare for you to speak so highly of someone.”

“I’m only stating the facts,” I said, blushing. Where was this sudden bashfulness coming from?

"I hope he's a good kid."

"Do you want me to look into him?"

"Maybe. Granhart's going to be in charge of him, so I'll let you know when he arrives."

"Please do."

Unfortunately, it would still be some time before his obligations would allow him to reach us.

Half a year came and went.

"You may disperse for lunch."

"Yes, ma'am!"

I was heading for my quarters after a training session. There were no current deployments planned for my unit, but Illumasia had been remilitarizing, so I expected that would soon change.

When I arrived, I saw my crystal glow. These arclink crystals were wonderful little devices that allowed the user to speak to another through magic. I picked it up and a voice echoed in my mind.

"He's arrived."

"To whom are you referring?"

"The boy from Merratoni, remember?"

"Ah, that's right. He's with Granhart?"

"For now."

"Understood. I'll make contact shortly."

"Thanks, Lumina."

I hurried off to find the stoic priest.

I soon spotted Granhart with a young man. A strikingly different yet familiar young man. There was still a youthfulness in his eyes, but in contrast to his

innocence was a body fit for an adventurer, not far outshone by Granhart's. Muscles bulged where once only bone had protruded. I breathed a sigh of relief that his aura was unchanged.

"Oh? You are the one I guided to the Healer's Guild in Merratoni, are you not?" I called out to him. "I believe your name was...Louise?"

He turned around. "It's been a long time, Miss Lumina. I never got a chance to thank you back then."

"I did nothing to warrant it. Tell me, Louise, how have you been?"

"I think reintroductions are in order," he said. "My name is Luciel. And I have to say, I'm impressed that you recognized me. Everyone says I've grown quite a bit."

I had forgotten his name, but he seemed to take no offense so there was no harm done. I invited him to stop by my quarters later.

As the two of us chatted in my room, I felt his story stir something inside of me. I sensed an intense, fearless drive within him, something I had never felt from the swaths of greedy, indolent healers I had seen over the years. The feeling within me was happiness.

I immediately contacted Lady Cattleya.

"The target has left," I transmitted through the crystal.

"What do you make of him?"

"He was...dull in certain areas, but I don't think he's malicious."

"Will he make it in the labyrinth?" she asked seriously.

"I think so. He's had experience in close-quarters combat, at the very least."

"Now, that sounds interesting."

"That's not all. He's apparently skilled enough to be able to use the Purification spell."

"Then he's raised his Holy Magic to level seven in just two years."

"It would seem so. He's an incredibly hard worker."

"Noted. I'm sure I'll see him tomorrow, so I'll make my own judgments."

"That would probably be best."

"Lend him a hand if he ever needs it, okay?"

"I will."

She went quiet. *"Well, that's strange."*

"What is?"

"Oh, nothing," she cooed. *"Keep up the hard work, Lumina."*

"Thank you, I will."

The connection ended.

"We paladins can't let a well-trained healer overtake us," I muttered. "We mustn't start slacking now."

My reunion with Luciel ignited a determined flame in me.

I was waiting in front of the dining hall with my two fellow paladins, Lucy and Queena. Our objective: to meet with the healer Luciel. And no, this was not a romantic rendezvous by any means.

Lady Cattleya had contacted me yesterday with information that, for the first time in decades, the tenth floor of the labyrinth had been conquered. The conqueror was, of course, Luciel. From her tone, however, his method of approach had been lacking in...intelligence. She asked me to assist him in any way I could, so there I stood, waiting for him right around the hour he usually took his meal.

"Lady Lumina, aren't we going inside?" Lucy asked.

"What are we standing around for?" Queena grumbled.

My companions were unaware of my goal. And just then, I spotted him.

"Luciel!"

Lucy called out to him before I could, making for the perfect disguise. We entered the hall together, "purely by coincidence."

Lucy and Queena were close in age to Luciel, so the three of them got along well. We all chatted with him over breakfast.

“I hear your progress up to the tenth floor was shockingly effortless,” I commented.

“Yeah, it has been,” he replied. “It’s too embarrassing to go into the details, but after my two years of training at the Adventurer’s Guild, the labyrinth hasn’t been much of an issue.”

“Were these your first battles against monsters?”

“Yes. All I’d done up until now was sparring.”

“It sounds like you’ve been doing well,” Lucy said encouragingly.

“I was really nervous at first, but things got moving quickly,” he recounted. “Purification does a number on them, and I discovered that imbuing my sword and spear with magic makes them cut through the undead like butter.”

“And what are your sword and spear ranks?” I asked.

“They went up yesterday, so they’re both at two now.”

“How are you using them? Are you alternating weapons each day?”

“Huh?” He looked confused. “Why would I do that? I’m using the spear in my left hand and the sword in my right. It keeps my options flexible.”

“I see... Continue.”

“So, it took me about ten days to reach the tenth floor,” he went on. “I fought small groups with my weapons and took out larger groups with Purification. When I heard the main chamber was going to be full of monsters, I didn’t think twice and went on in.”

Luciel continued his story. His prior gathering of information had turned out to be less than accurate (or perhaps he’d been the victim of a tragic miscommunication) and the “large group” he’d been expecting had in fact been a horde of countless undead foes. But he had believed in himself and stood his ground. It was then he had discovered he could not use his magic in that room.

However, Luciel was no ordinary healer. I could envision the battle, how he must have made peace with death as he slew beast after beast. He was a warrior's paragon, never faltering, even in the face of impossible odds.

"That sounds like quite the struggle indeed," I remarked. "I assume you healed your wounds with potions instead?"

"Huh, I bet that would have made things a lot easier."

"Excuse me?"

He laughed. "I'd never taken any damage before that, so I didn't bother carrying any."

"Did no one recommend that you bring the appropriate supplies?"

"I was told to, but they were so expensive. So, after I beat all the monsters, a *wight* showed up out of nowhere."

"And you equipped your shield *then*, yes? And surely barrier magic as well."

"Well, that's the thing. The whole reason I had it so rough when I was surrounded by monsters was because I hadn't cast any barriers before going into the boss room," he explained. "Honestly, if I wasn't used to nicks and bruises from Merratoni, I probably would've given up right then. And if I'd known there would be a wight, or that I wouldn't be able to use magic, I feel like I would have done a little better."

I assumed from the context that "boss" referred to the entity residing in the main chamber. "That's...certainly incredible. You entered the main chamber knowing full well that powerful enemies awaited you, without recovery options or barrier magic."

"I'm impressed, myself. I never would've thought the bow I just bought would end up being what decided it all."

"Ten floors in ten days is an exceptional pace. You are taking rests in between, yes?"

"Rests? Eh, I don't need those. I want to progress and the zombies down there make for good training. Oh, but I do make time to practice my magic fundamentals."

“Out of curiosity, how long have you been studying this sword-and-spear style of yours?” I asked.

“Since the day after I became an exorcist.”

At last, I understood. This boy was severely and critically lacking in basic common sense. All I could do was stare at him, mouth agape. Lucy and Queena shared my reaction.

“Luciel, have you gone mad?”

“Do you have a death wish?” Lucy said scornfully.

“You’re an idiot,” Queena added derisively. “If luck wasn’t on your side, you’d be dead right now.”

“I thought you were no longer an ignoramus, but I see now that you’ve merely traded ignorance for recklessness. I despise those who forsake the gift of life.”

“I beat myself up over it all night already, guys. Please, you’re killing me here,” he whimpered.

I nearly spat out that we weren’t the ones who would get him killed if he didn’t change his way of thinking, but Lucy spoke first.

“So, what are you going to do about it? Keep this up and you won’t last long.”

“You’re right. Honestly, I wish I could just go back to Merratoni and continue my training,” he said with a distant gaze.

“Healers can’t be transferred from Headquarters without a writ ordering the move,” Queena informed him. He wouldn’t be released that easily.

I suddenly remembered Lady Cattleya’s request. Luciel was in need of a hand.

“If it is training you want, I believe we can deliver.”

“Wait, really?”

“Indeed. You may find it rigorous for a healer, but I have no qualms about allowing you to join us. However, do not expect personal instruction.”

“As long as it doesn’t get in the way of my job, I’d be more than happy to.”

His readiness to accept pleased me. We would hold our joint sessions each week on the Day of Fire.

After breakfast, we parted ways and the ladies and I were on our way to the training grounds when Lucy asked, "Are you sure inviting him is a good idea?"

"What I'm certain of is that he will grow," I said. "He is a healer, far weaker than any paladin. His attributes will be low. What's more, he's only level one."

"Will he even be able to keep up with us?"

"I cannot say. But my reports inform me that he trained for two years without rest. We Valkyries are an elite few and we rank as the strongest because we endeavor to. But the unfortunate truth is that the hard-working are a rare breed within the Church. I intend to test his will, and if he fails then he will be nothing to us. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

I informed the rest of the unit of the plan, and the day of our joint training was soon upon us. I struggled to determine whether Luciel's chivalry, a quality rare in healers, was born from self-absorption or simple ignorance. Regardless, never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined such a man existed.

The entire regiment felt much the same. We were monsters in the eyes of many, but here was one who hesitated to strike us. Who treated us as women. Needless to say, the girls' fondness of him grew. As for me, I was in awe that he would show honest, genuine pause at the idea of fighting us, even being fully aware of the gap between our abilities. But I suppose I didn't exactly detest it.

Luciel was a powerful healer, that much was certain. Compared to us, however, the difference in physical ability was almost staggering. And there was something to be said for his sword-and-lance style. Nothing good, but it was certainly worthy of...comment. When he held his sword and shield before me properly, though, I found myself impressed. For his technique to be so skilled at only level two, his instructor must have been an extraordinary fighter.

We traded blows, and his swordsmanship was nothing to scoff at, but he was no warrior. Still, I acknowledged the immense effort he had surely put in,

despite the wide openings he left that spoke of his inexperience. He created one such opening by swiping his blade too wide, and I used it. But the moment my fist landed, I saw him smile. The damned boy *smiled*. A moment later, a pale light enveloped him, and he swung his sword backwards. He'd planned it from the start. A healer. He had never ceased his attack, and yet he could cast in the heat of battle. I could only imagine how he must have struggled and labored to reach such a level.

I was moved. Impressed beyond words. Such a display could only be returned in kind.

"Splendid maneuver!" I darted behind him and chopped the back of his neck, robbing him of his consciousness.

"Were you watching, ladies?" I asked the unit. "This is a healer. The class with the lowest attributes of any class, second only to mages. We, however, are blessed with high attributes and easily-enhanced skills."

We were paladins. A privileged few.

"Unfortunately, many of our peers are content to indulge in this luxury. But not Luciel. He is a man of talent. He conquered the tenth floor of our once-impenetrable labyrinth in a mere eleven days. And as long as the labyrinth exists, Lady Cattleya will never return home to the knights."

The Church was rotten...to its very core.

"We are going to train him. And we are going to train him well. Is that clear?" I looked at each of the Valkyries. There were no objections. "Good. Now resume your training!"

Luciel's barrier magic was far beyond the level of a two-year novice. His mere presence in a team of less-experienced Valkyries was enough to see them to victory, surprising everyone and elevating his reputation further.

Only field exercises remained on the agenda when the unexpected happened.

"Gather and saddle your steeds, ladies. We enter the wilderness to slay monsters."

“Yes, ma’am!”

“What?” Luciel’s sudden confusion was never a good omen.

“You have a question, Luciel?”

“Uh, not exactly. I’ve just never ridden a horse before.”

“That is...unexpected.”

I’d completely forgotten that he was village-born. Many villagers may have, at the very least, seen a steed before, but it wouldn’t be strange for him to have never touched or ridden one. On the other hand, most healers, even young ones, were wealthy enough to own horses. And it was honestly far-fetched that a man built like a knight had never once taken to the saddle. All the same, this was clearly a result of my own lack of forethought.

“It is what it is. I will have you practice with the stablehands. Our exercises are liable to be observed by others, you see.”

“I’m sorry. I feel bad about this.”

“It’s nothing. I lacked consideration. You may use the field to practice, and we will return when our exercise is done.”

“Thank you. You all be careful.”

“Ladies,” I called, “make your way there. I will be with you once I’ve seen Luciel to the stables.”

After dropping the healer off, I caught up with my unit. As we trotted along, we spoke of what had led Luciel being sent to Church Headquarters in the first place. Much of the discussion was praise for him. Merratoni healers were especially infamous, and when it came to light that Luciel himself was the dissident who had driven a nail through the greatest contributor to that city’s poor reputation, the ladies went mad with glee.

Luciel continued to join our training, and we continued to welcome him, until heightening tensions with the Illumasian Empire forced our regiment to deploy with the templars.

As we made our departure, something about the procession felt strange.

There was none of the usual scattered applause. On the contrary, the entire Holy City seemed to have turned out with united cheers of encouragement for us. Not even Lady Cattleya's past deployments had garnered such a reaction.

Amid the cries, I made out several words: "zombie," "masochist," and "Saint Weirdo." I searched for Luciel's aura and spotted him some distance away, having come to see us off. The Valkyries looked unfazed when I told them who was responsible for the ruckus.

Our hearts and minds unburdened and uplifted by the simple surprise of a well-loved healer, we departed for the border with vigor.

02 — Saint Weirdo's Day

Day in, day out, it was nothing but the undead. They were nasty and stank to high heaven, to the point where I was starting to doubt that anyone had ever actually run this training gauntlet in its entirety before. But someone like Brod or Lumina, someone who could move faster than the eye could register, would surely have made quick work of it.

Then it hit me. According to that background about the knights and all that, the reason none of those groups had managed to clear it before now was because the monsters' magic gradually tore at the seams of their minds, until confusion and panic destroyed them from within. That was how they justified sending lone healers down here instead.

We traded blows. My eyes never left my opponent, studying it for an opening and only attacking when I spotted one.

"You'd think the undead wouldn't feel pain," I taunted. "But you definitely feel something, don't you?"

Our blades clashed and metal rang out. I parried the next slash with my shield, then focused magic into my leg and struck the creature's right flank with it. It groaned in agony as it slammed into the labyrinth wall, before becoming a stone and falling to the floor.

I was nearing the three-month mark of my life in the labyrinth. My only reprieve was once a week, when I would come up to chat with Cattleya and practice horse riding, or replenish my food and Substance X stores.

I had progressed all the way to the thirtieth floor, but not to the boss room just yet. There was a new skill I'd learned from an adventurer I healed during one of my outings that I wanted to get the hang of first: Physical Enhancement. By manipulating the magical energy within me and circulating it through my body at high speeds, I could, as the name suggested, enhance my physical abilities. It quickly became one of my mainstays, especially considering how practiced I already was in Magic Handling.

"Think it's been almost a week now," I muttered, then made my way out of

the (very real) labyrinth of undeath.

“Welcome back. How have things been lately?” Cattleya asked, waiting for me where she always did.

“I’ve finally gotten the hang of those death knights. They’re no problem now. I could probably take on several with Physical Enhancement.”

“Impressive. That reminds me, you’re still not going to class-up?”

I’d risen to healer level six just the other day. “I don’t think so. I’m using it as motivation to clear the labyrinth. It’ll be my reward.”

She giggled. “Has anyone ever told you you’re surprisingly headstrong?”

“You think so? Anyway, I’m planning on heading to the thirtieth floor’s main chamber soon.”

“I know you must be tired of hearing me say it, but be careful. Stay alive down there.”

“I’ll try,” I laughed.

“Are you heading straight back down?”

“Not yet. I have an errand to run first. Oh, yeah, and how have the Valkyries been doing?”

“Well enough. They’re still stuck in the field.”

Lumina and her regiment had returned to the city once, but the fighting at the border had intensified, so they were sent right back out. Ever since, they’d been stationed at a bordertown. And worse, they were on orders to protect healers, which didn’t bode well.

“Those ladies are a compassionate bunch,” I said.

“And worth a whole lot more than some pack of greedy healers,” Cattleya grumbled.

“As a healer myself, I have to agree.”

“Oh, yeah... I forgot you were one of those.” I could only laugh. I certainly didn’t look the part—I was more knight than healer at this point. My paladin

armor fit me well. “I keep confusing you for a paladin now. It doesn’t help when I hear people calling you ‘Saint *Sir* Weirdo’ these days.”

“You really like teasing me, don’t you?”

She chuckled. “So, what’s the plan for your day off, then?”

“Stop by the Adventurer’s Guild, stock up on food somewhere, then head back down.”

“Don’t you get sick of fighting those things all the time?”

“Surprisingly, no. Maybe because my mental resistance skills are so high.”

“What is it I told you not to do again?”

“Push myself. I know,” I said coolly. “I’ll be back later.”

“Have a safe trip.”

I’d met with no trouble over the last three months. Partly because of my build, which hid my infamous job, and mostly because I spent my days down in the dungeon. Social encounters weren’t common there and no one knew when I’d be back out again. The only inconveniences I’d found myself faced with were pointless pranks in the quarters neither my belongings nor I ever found ourselves in to begin with.

While thinking all this over, I arrived at the Adventurer’s Guild.

“Excuse me!”

The guildmaster came over to greet me. “There he is, Saint Weirdo! Here for the usual? Or ya here to heal?”

“It’s rare to see you outside of the kitchen. Did something happen?”

“Figured ya’d be here for a refill before long, that’s all. And ya said you took a day off every week.”

“I’m surprised you remembered. It’s been over a month.”

“Bah! It’ll be a cold day’n hell before I forgetcha after all you’ve done for us.”

“Then let me rephrase the question. Why are you always in the kitchen?”

“I like it.”

“I see.” I left it at that. “Would you mind sending some letters for me again? And I’ll need ten more barrels of Substance X, please. Also…”

“Saint Weirdo,” the vice guildmaster, Milty, interjected.

“Oh, hello, Milty. Please gather the injured downstairs.”

“Will do.”

“And here are those barrels for the Substance X.” I called up my empty barrels and the guildmaster carried them off to the kitchen while Milty descended the stairs to the training grounds.

When did this “Saint Weirdo’s Day” thing even begin? Ever since I had earned my new nickname, I’d been visiting the guild once a month, accepting requests as an adventurer. I was paid in silver, sometimes in information, sometimes sparring matches that I would use to judge my skill level and get advice. An unexpected side effect of this was that novice adventurers were training more, meaning fewer casualties and failed missions. No one wanted to be the one to lose to the healer.

Right now, I could take on several E-or D-rank adventurers and not lose, but I couldn’t exactly *win* either. Every so often, I’d win a one-on-one with a D-ranker, though. Especially if my opponent was the hotheaded type. C-rankers were my new baseline training partners and I was confident that I wouldn’t die where I stood the moment I came across a monster anymore.

Saint Weirdo’s Day had spawned influxes of high-ranking requests as adventurers started accepting them in conjunction with their “new holiday.” There were fewer and fewer powerful monsters in the region.

For some reason, I currently stood at the center of this cycle of positivity, and at some point the adventurers of the Holy City had taken a liking to me. All of this information came to me from the chef-slash-guildmaster Grantz and his waitress-slash-vice guildmaster Milty, the two top adventurers in the branch. They *were* the top ones, right? It was often hard to tell with that strange duo.

Someone suddenly approached me. “How’s it goin’, Saint?”

“Oh, Elitz. It’s been a while.”

“Gettin’ any better at that Physical Enhancement technique?”

“I think so, but it’s pretty tough. I still can’t keep up with my own speed.”

“With a Magic Handling and Control skill like what you’ve got, I bet circulating your energy’s nothin’ to you, huh?” he remarked. “Still level one?”

“Yep, still haven’t beaten any monsters.”

“Gah! Man, talk about wasted potential! If you can fight that good at level one, I don’t even wanna think about how unreal you’d be if you were higher!”

“I’m just trying to survive. Does everyone know about that technique?”

“Sure, it’s pretty well-known, but knowing about it doesn’t matter if you can’t control magic.”

“True.”

“So, anyway, ’bout that last match...”

Elitz—an A-ranker—and I chatted until Grantz returned with my Substance X. I put the containers into my magic bag, then went downstairs. Two casts of Area High Heal, some Purification, a bit of Recover, a dash of Dispel, and the job was done.

“That about does it,” I murmured. “Now, does anyone have any information from Merratoni or on the Valkyries?” After the healing came news from anyone who had some to share.

“The Valkyries are safe, but there have been fatalities in the templars,” one reported.

“I hear a general of the Empire, the Lion of War himself, tore through a citadel single-handedly on horseback,” another said. Whoever this “Lion of War” was, I didn’t want to meet him.

Merratoni came next. “The Whirlwind’s been goin’ nuts and throwin’ adventurers in the basement to train.”

“The Bear Chef’s forcing Substance X down their throats and cookin’ up ways to work it into recipes.”

It sounded like Galba had his hands full with those two. I couldn't help but smile before a single sentence replaced all traces of nostalgic joy with crippling anxiety.

"Apparently, a few of the Adventurer's Guild receptionists are getting married."

"You. Details," I demanded.

"The way I hear it, some A-rank beastfolk wooed 'em."

But which receptionists were they? Nanaella? Monica? Was that why they hadn't been replying to my letters? I was suddenly overcome by loneliness.

After that, I ordered some food at the dining hall before leaving. On my way out, I received my compensation and the adventurers and staff invited me to lunch someday. I needed more food, though, so I stopped by several other places, then made for the labyrinth.

"Time to head down." *Think I'll sleep in the tenth-floor boss room tonight.*

I'd recently noticed something: taking out monsters with my magically-charged weapons increased my Holy Magic experience by one with every kill. My drive rekindled and my focus sharp, I set my sights on moving up to level nine. Level ten was still a far-off dream, but I was proud of my pace.

"I'll take on the thirtieth-floor boss once I've gotten a better handle on Physical Enhancement."

I tested out my new technique a bit more, then fell into a deep, peaceful, Angel's Pillow-assisted slumber.

03 — Bearing Fruit in the Third Boss Room

I trained my sword and shield work one-on-one with the death knight and hardened my reflexes against the mob on the tenth floor. There was still sloppiness in my form, efficiency to be carved out, split-second judgments to be sharpened. If I could land even one hit consistently, squarely, like a machine, and I augmented it with Physical Enhancement, it'd take me to the next level. Teams of ghouls, mummies, ghosts, and skeletons (knights and archers alike) fell to me in droves.

This was how I spent the three months leading up to tackling the third boss room. I put my chances at success at “fairly high,” but I wasn't just aiming for success. I was aiming for the perfect victory.

Three months ago, I'd nearly met my doom at the hands of mere ghouls more times than I could count. But I had my healing powers. One step at a time, I carefully polished my skills. And now I could face them. That was what hard work was about. I could feel my familiarity and experience with combat grow with each battle.

No one had been on my case about the lack of progress for half a year, but I was starting to feel the pull. I was itching to move forward before I became some layabout, mooching off my wages with nothing to show for it.

“Take that!” I cried. “Too easy!”

I had my offensive sword-and-spear style, and my orthodox sword-and-shield style, and now my Physical Enhancement technique added kicks to my arsenal. The undead were simple to read and vaporized into stones with a single well-placed strike.

I was racking up so many points from all the gems I'd collected that I was running out of things to use them for. I had everything I needed now, and these items wouldn't break any time soon, so I didn't see myself in need of replacements in the foreseeable future. To help curb the problem of excess gems, Cattleya started letting me custom-order weapons from the dwarves. They also got in a new, more resistant magic robe, far more powerful than the

one the Church had issued me (and that one was worth ten whole platinum). I snagged it for two million points. Not that I had much to compare it to, since I'd never actually taken a magical hit head-on with my first robe.

The dwarves were more than happy to lend their services to their strange new battle-healer client...which was just what I needed. Rumors circulating amongst people I'd never even met.

"I'm just glad I have friends who're there for me," I muttered. "I feel like I'm getting stronger too...even if I haven't leveled up in close to half a year."

Still, cutting down shambling undead hordes wasn't a bad job. At least I didn't have to fight *live* monsters or bandits like Lumina's group. I didn't know how I would've held up if these had been flesh and blood enemies. Being able to go all out against an opponent with a clean conscience while worries had me feeling down kept me fresh and alive.

Over and over these thoughts churned in my head, and then the day of my third boss fight arrived.

I stood before the door, making my final preparations.

"Weapons, check. Armor, check. Magic bag, check. Buffs, up. Substance X, good to go." I downed my mug and heaved a sigh. "All right, let's do this."

I slowly pushed open the door and cautiously inched inside. It slammed shut, light illuminating the room. Only this time, it wasn't a square. I stood on a conical slope, tilting downward.

But that was the least of my concerns.

"You've gotta be kidding me."

The threat before me was like nothing I'd ever faced. Three wights. Five death knights. Every one of their glowing, red eyes now focused on me.

I revved up my magical energy, churning it within me and enhancing my entire body at once, then lit the fuse of battle with a chant.

"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Banish the impurities before me and shepherd them unto deliverance."

Purification!"

I ran along the sloped floor as I cast, to keep from being surrounded or instantly overwhelmed by a concentrated attack. But, unsurprisingly, no matter how much I chanted, not one of the eight was nice enough to go down for me. They did freeze, though, giving me enough time to stash my sword, summon a dagger, and throw it haphazardly. My only goal was to thin their numbers.

It sank right into one of the knights' skulls. I flung more daggers, but anything I threw at the wights, the knights blocked, now freed from their paralysis. They raised their staves and fired spells. Without the intelligence to even lead their shots, though, the attacks were easily evaded as I continued to run.

The death knights never budged from their defensive position at the flat center of the room. None of the magic hurled at me was particularly powerful, so if this was all they had then it was my turn, I decided.

I bombarded them with Purification after Purification. After my fifth casting, I sensed the miasma in the center starting to thin. I cast a sixth round of the spell, augmenting my strength to its very limits, and once the undead were completely immobilized, I charged right in with a throaty battle cry. I had a little something of my own to try out.

They knew I was coming, but they were frozen stiff and the knights could barely raise their shields, the wights their staves to cast lances of blackened water, air, and earth.

My strategy had paid off so well that it could only have been a stroke of pure luck—Monsieur Luck. The God of Fate almost seemed to be there behind me, every step of the way.

Unfazed by my enemies' spells, I held up my shield, which was strengthened by my barrier magic. My resilient paladin armor and magic robe fortified me further. Several lances struck me but dissipated painlessly as if they were nothing.

The knights lowered their defenses and adopted battle stances, and just like that the battle turned in my favor. It was just what I'd been waiting for.

I deflected the strikes of two blades, and when all eight were within range, I

chanted, *“Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Take my energy for an angelic breath and mend the beings of this realm. Area High Heal!”*

This was what I’d been waiting to try out. And it worked. Far better than my earlier cleansing magic.

The monsters shrieked in agony and dropped their weapons one by one. Their pained cries sounded almost tortured, to the point of making my stomach churn, but this was my chance and I couldn’t let it pass. I approached the wights, chanting a second Area High Heal, and cleaved each of them in two. They were no match for my enhanced strength and instantly vanished.

I then completed my chant, and with the second Area High Heal the death knights, too, began to melt away. It was that easy.

“Phew,” I sighed. “That went just about perfectly.”

Or so I thought, until I considered how much magic I’d spent all at once. There had to have been a more efficient method, I began to think.

I gathered up the stones, purified the items, and stashed them away. I also purified the room itself, in case that thick, purple smoke the undead had disappeared in was toxic. All the while, I thought back on the battle, grateful that I’d taken the time to learn the new spell. I was certain that if this boss had been my first, I’d have died. As overwhelming as the horde on the tenth floor had been, a swarm of zombies were still nothing compared to death knights.

This fight had certainly been far from perfect. It only seemed flawless because things had happened to go well for me. Admonishments were all that came to mind now.

“I don’t want to think about how screwed I would have been if I’d had to take on this many in the first boss room.”

As I wrapped everything up, the staircase to the next level appeared in the same rumble fashion as it always did. Floor forty seemed to exist, just as the pope had said.

If the death knights in the labyrinth’s halls were sort of like foot soldiers, novices, then the ones of the boss rooms had to have been *real* veteran knights.

I wondered what sort of ranking system the death knights followed, then remembered there were monster taming skills. It would have been interesting to chat with someone proficient in them.

The Church's knights had supposedly made it this far in the past, so the monsters that had caused them to turn on each other were probably close. There had to have been some treasure chest or key item to help with that, right?

Suddenly, I realized how plain my life at the Church was. I was like some ascetic monk, fighting evil spirits on my path to zenhood.

I sat down to have lunch, the room nice and clean after my cleansing magic, then dove straight down to floor thirty-one.

The first enemy to cross my path was a ghoul. Its unusual hue implied that these creatures would be a step above their counterparts above. I immediately backtracked to the boss room in shock, to find five death knights waiting for me.

"Looks like I've got a new training room."

These five knights' skills were likely on par with, if not greater than, my own. They'd make the perfect fodder for my magic and Physical Enhancement training. My stomach ran on its own schedule, however, and eventually I had to acquiesce to its growling.

Regardless, this day, the one hundred and ninety-eighth of my descent into the labyrinth, marked my victory against the thirtieth-floor boss.

04 — Another Audience with the Pope

As I emerged from the labyrinth, Cattleya called out to me, “Welcome back. Why do you look so haggard? No, never mind, I’m grateful to see you alive again.”

“Please, stop that. You really shouldn’t be the one bowing to me after all the help you’ve been. It feels so wrong you’ll give me a stress ulcer.”

Cattleya and her position were still a complete mystery to me, and not knowing who you were really speaking to was surprisingly daunting. Although, the fact that she could take me for audiences with the pope meant that she definitely wasn’t the average citizen.

“Oh, will I?” she smirked playfully.

“Why are you looking at me like that? You’re not going to get to me, so could you turn these into points now, please?”

“Sheesh, you’re no fun.” She took my card and transferred my stones to her bag—a *magic* bag that was even higher grade than my own. It was what she always used to calculate my points. “This was a big haul. That’s 426,549 points.”

Five more trips and I could’ve bought a second magic robe if I wanted to.

“Wow, you’re right. I’m glad, though. I was almost done for this time, and I would’ve been if it wasn’t for Area High Heal.”

“You’re so young and you can use *Area High Heal* already? Luciel, have you been lying to me about your age?”

My heart skipped a beat. “Er, I mean, I couldn’t even use Heal when I registered at fifteen,” I stammered.

“Do you take any strange medicines? Have you been doing drugs?”

Thankfully, she wasn’t entirely serious. The matter of my age was a strange subject.

“Why in the world would I... Wait!” It wasn’t a drug, but Substance X seemed a likely culprit.

“I think a confession is in order.” She linked her arm around mine and clung to me like a vice. “Before Her Holiness, of course.”

I wasn’t flustered, though. I knew that Cattleya reveled in teasing me like this. “Fine by me,” I said. “There are a few things I’d like to find out myself, so I’d love to see the pope if you please.”

“Oh, aren’t we aggressive today. Feeling confident after beating the thirtieth-floor ‘boss’?”

“Not quite. I’m hoping to learn more about this Substance X stuff I’ve been drinking for two and a half years.”

She paused. “That isn’t as exciting as I was expecting.”

“Hey, I might finally get to solve the mystery.”

“Something about you feels more assertive than usual. Were you actually on death’s doorstep today? Maybe it’s gone to your head.”

“Finally back on topic,” I laughed. “To be fair, I came out totally unharmed, even if only through pure dumb luck. I also got a real taste of just how effective holy magic is against the undead.”

“And what if it wasn’t?” Cattleya asked pointedly.

“Then I probably would have died, or very nearly, at least.”

“Luciel, I don’t want to hear you talk about losing your life so casually.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry; it was just hypothetical.”

“That’s okay. Shall we be off, then?” As we started walking, she asked, “So what did you fight this time?”

“Three wights and five death knights. I nearly panicked when I saw them all.” Without Physical Enhancement, I’d have been a dead man walking. Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration, but it wouldn’t have been pretty.

“You’re so strong that it’s easy to forget you’re a healer,” she said. “Maybe if they all trained like you, we’d see more healers with swords out there.”

“I think it depends on the person. I only stood a chance this time because I could use Area High Heal, and I needed Holy Magic level eight for that. Progress

could become problematic if I start seeing undead dragons or dullahans or other beast-type undead monsters down there.”

“You think so? By the way, dullahans are technically classified as sprites, not the undead. Holy magic wouldn’t affect them in the same way.”

“Sprites?! Like fairies? I really hope you didn’t just set a flag there.”

“A ‘flag’? What do you mean?”

“Nothing, never mind.”

“You mentioned something about this ‘Substance X’ before. You don’t know what it is?”

“Other than you get it at Adventurer’s Guilds and that it’s absolutely disgusting, no. Oh, also that a sage made it for adventurers, or so they say. Have you ever heard of it?”

“I can’t say I have. Is it famous?”

“Oh, yeah. To the point where drinking it is enough to warrant a nickname, apparently,” I grumbled.

“It sounds like quite the drink. But we’ve arrived, so we’ll continue this conversation later.”

“Right.”

“Your Holiness,” Cattleya called through the door. “It is Cattleya.”

“You may enter,” the voice answered.

Cattleya led me inside, to my third audience with the pope.

Cattleya and I took a knee and bowed before Her Holiness. “Might this matter concern the master of the thirtieth floor?”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” I replied. “They have been defeated.”

“Luciel, your deeds continue to astound me. Alone, you have ventured down thirty floors. I must confess, I did not anticipate this.”

“I’m humbled, Your Holiness. But it was only thanks to the equipment you so

kindly gave me.”

“Oh,” she sighed, amused, “but that is not all, no. Your magical energy is not what it was when first we met. I sense heightened vigor within you.”

Was she psychic, or did she just have some kind of appraisal skill? She surely knew that I was still level one, so why would she tell me that? Unless it was part of this whole fake labyrinth shtick.

“About that, Your Holiness,” Cattleya spoke up. “Luciel tells me he has been drinking a liquid created by a sage for over two years now. It is known as ‘Substance X.’”

“Oh?”

“This, Your Holiness.” I summoned a barrel of it from my bag.

Cattleya grimaced. “Put that away at once!” she cried.

“Er, what, is it poisonous?” Did it smell that bad? It had the lid on and everything.

Ah, crap, a bit leaked out. That’d do it.

I couldn’t see the pope’s face, but it didn’t take a detective to know that she must have shared the same revolted, scrunched expression as her handmaidens and Cattleya wore. My show-and-tell probably hadn’t been the smartest idea.

I put the barrel away and cast Purification. Once everyone’s nostrils had recuperated, I moved on. “Every Adventurer’s Guild has a special appliance, and when you imbue magic into it, this liquid comes out. Or so I hear.” I’d never seen it for myself.

“A special appliance?” Her Holiness paused. “Its name. What was it, you said?”

“They call it Substance X. Every new adventurer drinks it at least once.”

“I recall the name... A concoction of various herbs, dragon heart, spirit water, freshly harvested mandrake, among other items, meant to awaken the potential of the consumer, I believe it was. But it was a pill, if memory serves.”

Oh, how I’d have loved a pill. How much easier it’d be to take that way. But

Substance X was a liquid, no matter how much I wished otherwise.

“The inventor, this sage, spoke of a creation—a magical apparatus to produce a perfect, infinite supply,” she explained. “However, by mechanisms unknown, the substance was liquified in the process. And so it was renamed. Or should have been.”

Hold on, that sage was alive over a century ago. The pope was talking like she’d been there to hear the guy speak. Maybe her kind, whatever race she was, lived abnormally long lives.

But then if “Substance X” was the old name, what happened to the new one?

“In its capsule form, the item was known as ‘Substance X.’ In liquid form, its abject vileness warranted its own creator to rechristen it ‘God’s Lament.’”

No doubt, this stuff was ridiculously OP, but maybe the reason I was one of the few able to stomach something that made even *deities* lament its existence had something to do with the fact that I wasn’t from this world. In any case, I was glad to hear that I hadn’t been drinking something worse.

“Well, I think I owe my successes to this ‘liquid lament,’ if you will,” I said. “And that name is certainly an apt way to describe how revolting it is.”

For crying out loud, just drinking the stuff was enough to destroy your sense of taste and smell for half an hour. I wasn’t convinced there wasn’t some kind of poison in its list of ingredients, even if it wasn’t in large enough quantities to cause harm.

“I’ve been drinking a mug of it three times a day, after every meal, for two and a half years now. I have to give credit where credit is due. Would you like to try some, Your Holiness?” I patted my magic bag. Even if she hadn’t had a hand in making it, the fact that she’d never tasted it before felt a little unfair.

“You...really drink that stuff?” Cattleya asked in disbelief.

“I do. Life is fragile, and I wanted to do everything I could to preserve mine, to leave nothing to chance. I’d drink anything in a heartbeat if it made me stronger with no risks or consequences...unless you count rude nicknames and sad looks, I suppose.” I kind of depressed myself, saying it out loud like that. But it was true and it never stopped being hurtful.

“I see now that it was no substance that carried your growth, Luciel, but your own effort and strife.”

“Luciel...you’re sure something,” Cattleya remarked, slipping back into her casual tone.

I noticed they seemed intent on ignoring my previous offer.

“Hm. Very well,” Her Holiness said. “I must say, I find it unbecoming of a sage to be so negligent in the consideration of their creation’s palatability.” I wholeheartedly agreed. “Allow us to proceed. What of the beasts you have slain?”

“I defeated three wights and five death knights with Area High Heal, Your Holiness.”

“Indeed? Quite the feat at such a young age. I see great things in your future. Perhaps you may one day join the ranks of the archbishops.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness.”

“I would see the effects they relinquished,” she ordered.

I gave each of the items to her retainers. Her Holiness examined them carefully, as she always did.

“These belonged to...those three women...” I heard her mutter. Then her voice became firm, severe, and she commanded, “That will be all for today. Cattleya will see to your reward. I wish you luck with your endeavors.”

Ah, so she was pretending to know them this time. Ominous.

I was escorted out, then made for the dining hall for the first time in what felt like forever.

“Long time no see,” I greeted the serving lady. “An extra helping today, please.”

“Um,” she hesitated, “excuse me, sir knight, but how much would you like?”

I glanced around and lowered my voice. “Why are you talking like that?” I asked, extremely confused. “It’s me. Luciel.”

She froze and stared at me long and hard. Gradually, her face softened into a smile. “Well, goodness, it *is* you! I barely recognized you with your hair up and all that armor! I’ll have that right out for you, okay?”

I watched her bustle about the kitchen then return with my meal, plus a little extra.

“Here you are, dear. Eat up and get some rest!”

“It looks delicious. You all do great work.”

“You and your compliments,” she beamed. “I’ll pass it along to the others.”

“Please do. Thanks again.”

I wondered as I took my seat: was being a server supposed to be that nerve-racking? Was it that stressful of a job?

I soon finished eating. “Thank you, it was great,” I told the server. “I’ll come back tomorrow morning. Could I order another large lunch to go too?”

“Of course. I’ll have something packed for you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

I said goodbye, then headed for my quarters. No one bothered me while I was out and about. They probably assumed I wouldn’t be around, and I doubted anyone would get violent in a public area... Not even those bold enough to try and assassinate someone at Church HQ. Especially not after how familiar I’d become with the pope.

I flipped through my long-neglected grimoires and went through my tried and true magic training regimen before hitting the hay.

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast, I took my lunch down to the labyrinth. It was rare to see Cattleya there this early, but I found her at the counter when I arrived.

“Good morning, Luciel. Her Holiness asked me to give you this.” She hesitantly handed me two pieces of parchment.

“What is it?”

“Everything you’ll want to know about the effects of God’s Lament, Substance X.”

Notes and descriptions filled the pages. “Wow, this is a lot of information. Thanks, I’ll read it while I’m down there.”

“Work hard,” she said. “And listen, I’m always here if you need to talk, all right?”

“Um, okay? Thank you.” I thought I saw sympathy flash across her face for a moment, but it could have been my imagination.

I descended to the tenth floor, cutting down monsters along the way, and took a moment to sit down and read the notes before going to sleep.

No amount of preparation could have braced me for the contents.

What follows is a record of my creation: God’s Lament, also known as Substance X.

Occupations involving the Church, including knights, healers, and templars, tend to result in a decrease in the three base appetites: sleep, hunger, and sex. Substance X, or God’s Lament (as I was so regretfully compelled to rename it), was created for the sole purpose of countering this, of offering those individuals of the Church fairness and the simple joys of life.

Its effects include increased hunger, heightened sex drive, and stimulation of the autonomic nervous system. There are side effects, however. One being an increased resistance to abnormal status conditions. Another being bolstered cellular activity while sleeping, thus causing easier status value growth.

I initially intended to offer this within the church itself, where it was invented, but its stench became the subject of much criticism. It did not take long before it was deemed unfit for the ecclesiastic, and I was ordered to be done with it.

But I would not abandon my work, the very reason I was made a sage. So I spoke with the guildmaster of the Adventurer’s Guild, Cryos, and we reached an agreement. It would be stored within the adventurers’ guildhalls.

I pray that God’s Lament will one day be what saves this world. When one

day, a novice sees the potential of a god's grief and imbibes its fury.

My work, I believe, will be of much use to the Adventurer's Guilds, and I will now dedicate my efforts to the pursuit of a remedy that the Church might finally accept.

The second page was a detailed report on the conclusions of research into Substance X's effects. There, it was written that Substance X did increase the three aforementioned appetites, but the true nature of its effects was in converting those desires into the energy that caused its ability-enhancing properties.

The moment I finished reading, it all made sense, including the meaning behind Cattleya's pitiful gaze.

What if...she thought I was impotent?

Everything fell into place at once. By god, was my package damaged for good? The horrifying truth was that just about every woman in the world was drop-dead gorgeous, but not *once* had I been nervous around them. Not one *single time* had I felt either hot or bothered.

"No, wait, I've been nervous plenty of times! I've had lots of women take my breath away! Everything's just fine," I convinced myself. "That's it, once this labyrinth is done, I'm finding love!"

I remembered Nanaella and Monica, the fact that they hadn't replied to any of my letters, and fell into a slight depression.

The next day, my exhausted body was bursting with a strange energy. I made it straight down to the thirtieth floor in one go and finally broke out of my funk. The following day, I trained against the boss room death knights in between explorations of the thirty-first floor.

"For my future!"

I didn't take risks and simply wiped out the whole group with Purification when things got dangerous. The fact that my magic was strong enough to do that in one shot was reassuring. I gradually ramped up the intensity, slowly but surely.

My labyrinth training montage had begun.

05 — Disaster in the Holy City

People don't grow as simply as they do in stories. There's no real-life training arc that gets you from point A to point B like it was meant to be. Protagonists fight and struggle with all they have, grapple with weakness, defy society. Eventually, with a bit of luck, they overcome the odds and grow. They power up, win the battles they lost in the past, and the story moves on.

But this wasn't fiction.

One month after discovering the truth about Substance X, I'd completed my exploration of floors thirty-one to forty. I was proud of my pace. But I had no great success story to tell, no nail-biting adventure worthy of a protagonist. *What am I doing wrong?* I wondered. I had the luck, to a monstrous degree, in fact, but maybe Monsieur Luck didn't work quite like the sheer dumb fortune of the main characters in the stories I'd read.

For example, the experience I gained from charting out each floor led me to a skill that allowed me to visualize maps in my head. And that wasn't all either. The one major threat in this labyrinth, the traps, were always first triggered by monsters. It almost seemed intentional, after a point. And the first treasure chest I found, after I'd started to doubt that they even existed, was not only completely un-booby-trapped but contained a highly advanced healing grimoire that I'd never seen anywhere else.

Ghastly skeletal creatures in flowing black robes that conjured images of the Grim Reaper himself weren't even a challenge. Sure, they were only wraiths, but I had expected a tougher fight than the one they put up. I bet they never imagined my Aura Coat and Spiritual Resistance would completely nullify their dark magic. I almost felt bad for surprise-attacking them when they inched closer, thinking their spells had affected me. Substance X had made me impervious to their illusions and mind control, so the magic they cast would simply shatter and fizzle away as it enveloped me.

The way that every single one of these creatures sneered when they thought they had won sent shivers down my spine and made me feel sorry for those imaginary people who had supposedly died at their hands. I liked to imagine

that when they vanished in a puff of purple miasmic smoke they cried out, “What?! Impossible!” in disbelief.

Normally, I’d have been excited about how strong I’d grown after clearing ten whole floors in only a month. But I had an inkling of what the fourth boss would be, which left me feeling more worried than gratified. Assuming the pope had built this place, this would be the climax of the scenario she’d crafted—the first expedition. I was about to meet the paladin and templar captains who had defeated the *original* fourth boss.

“I feel like I’ll be gutted if I waltz right in, so maybe I’ll stop by the Adventurer’s Guild first. Gather some info.”

I couldn’t shake my bad feeling, so I left the next boss for another day.

“Welcome back.” Waiting for me as I emerged was Cattleya’s usual warm smile.

After learning the shocking truth about Substance X, I felt the need to recount to her the details of what had led to me drinking it in the first place.

“Oh, that sounds awful. It’s a good thing the rumors they spread about you weren’t any worse.”

And with that foreboding statement, our rapport returned to normal.

“I finally made it to the fortieth floor,” I said.

“You never stop amazing me, Luciel. So, what kinds of monsters are down there?”

“Wraiths, death knights, mummies, ghouls. Nothing good, really.”

“Question... Has anyone ever said that you lack common sense?”

“Um, yes. Lumina, about fifteen minutes after meeting her in Merratoni, actually.” Now, that was nostalgic. Well, aside from the awful glare she’d given me at the time. I could’ve done without that.

“That doesn’t surprise me somehow,” Cattleya remarked. “I know you’ve taken on wights, but wraiths surpass even A-rank monsters on the danger scale.”

“I know, but dark magic doesn’t do a thing to me. My support magic and resistances make sure of it. Plus, I might be sturdier than I give myself credit for.” I had a certain substance to thank for that, of course.

“Because of...you-know-what?”

“Yep. It’s given me grief over the last few years, but I’m grateful for it.”

“‘Grief’ is certainly one word I’d use to describe it.”

“Well,” I laughed, “I think I’m going to pop into the Adventurer’s Guild for a change of pace.”

“Oh, before I forget, the Valkyries came back briefly but only to report in. Then they were sent right back out.”

“Uh, is it just me or does it seem like Lumina’s regiment is the only one that’s this busy?”

“No. It’s not just you, but it won’t be long now,” she returned with a menacing, icy grin. “A wound must be disinfected before it heals. You remember that, Luciel, and tell me if anything happens.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” I stuttered.

Cattleya’s overwhelming intensity reminded me of Brod when Bottaculli had marched straight into the guildhall. I left for the Adventurer’s Guild in a cold sweat.

I felt a tug on my robe just as I was about to enter the building.

“Hm?” I turned around and saw nothing. “Must’ve imagined it.”

I went to open the doors again when I finally noticed a small beastgirl holding the hem of my robe.

“Could you let go of me, please? Do you need something?”

The girl nodded repeatedly, tears welling up in her eyes. She released my robe, and I crouched down to meet her gaze. As I was pondering what to do, I realized that me being alone with a young girl posed an ominous threat to my already-damaged name. Bringing her to the guild staff was probably the

smartest option here.

“So, you need help? Why don’t we head into the guildhall first, okay?”

The teary-eyed girl hesitated, then nodded again. I hoped this was a simple case of a lost child.

“Welcome to the Adventurer’s Guild, Saint Weirdo!” two voices shouted as we entered. “We’ve been waiting for you, Mister Luciel!”

“What?! Nanaella? Monica? What are you two doing here?”



I couldn't believe my eyes. I'd waited so long to hear from them only to be met with deafening silence, and now there they were. Right in front of me. Maybe they'd come to tell me about their weddings in person. It had been several months since I'd heard about the engagements, after all.

I'd just braced myself for the news when a group of adventurers appeared out of nowhere and dragged me downstairs.

"Hey, wait!" I shouted. "I don't have time for this right now!"

My pleas fell on deaf ears. Nanaella and Monica were one thing. They'd understand. But I didn't want to freak out the little girl I'd brought with me.

The adventurers downstairs spotted me as I entered and began to cheer.

"Saint Weirdo's here, guys!"

"We're saved!"

"Don'tcha mean the Masochist Zombie Healer?"

"Shut the hell up, idiot; that name's forbidden! He's Saint Weirdo, or Saint Sir Weirdo the Knight to you."

"Look alive, folks! Help's here!"

"This way, Saint Weirdo! Hurry!"

"Someone haul in the injured around town!"

"Give the Saint hell 'n I'll drop your damn rank here and now. Everyone got that?" Even the guildmaster joined the clamor. My timing couldn't have been better.

After my captors finally released me, I made sure that the beastgirl was still behind me, then got Grantz's attention. "Wow, that's a lot of wounded today. But first, I found this little girl looking for help in front of the guild. Can you see what she wants?"

"Get in damn line, I said!" he barked at the adventurers. "Whatcha say? Oh, the girl. Kids aren't my specialty. Milty, take care 'o the sharp-nosed gal there."

"Of course," Milty replied. "Saint Weirdo, please begin with that group there. They need urgent care."

“Got it.”

My head still spinning from the chaos, I began to administer treatment. Three Area High Heals, a few Cures, Recovers, and Dispel, and thirty minutes later, I finally finished. I downed a bitter potion to stave off the exhaustion and nearly forgot about Nanaella and Monica as I focused on recovering my magic. Before I chatted with them, though, I had to address what I had actually stopped by for.

“Excuse me, Guildmaster, I’d like to learn more about undead monsters. Could you guys look into that for me?”

“Brainiacs,” he yelled, “hit the books! Saint Weirdo’s not gettin’ away today!”

The adventurers gave a hearty shout of approval.

“I’m doing what now?”

The newly-healed patients stampeded up the stairs, leaving only me, the guild staff, and the beastgirl holding hands with Nanaella and Monica, who had joined us at some point.

“I’m sorry, Saint Weirdo, but could you accompany the little girl back to the slums? Quickly,” Milt said.

“Um, quickly? Is there a hurry?”

“Yes, there is.”

“I’m sorry, Nanaella, Monica. It looks like we’ll have to catch up later.”

“Oh, we’re going with you,” Nanaella declared.

“Let’s get going,” Monica added.

When did they become so assertive? I knew I wouldn’t get a real answer if I asked, so I kept my thoughts to myself.

“Are there any adventurers who could come and help keep the girls safe, Guildmaster?” I asked.

“I’ll escort ya there personally,” he replied.

You didn’t become a guildmaster without being a distinguished adventurer yourself. We could rest easy with him as our guard.

“Thanks, that’d be great. Nanaella, the Holy City is even harder on beastpeople than Merratoni. Please be careful.”

“I will.”

Wounded adventurers, Nanaella and Monica, and a lost beastgirl. Things were getting messy. But I held it together and the five of us set out for the slums. None of us had any idea what we’d find when we arrived.

I hadn’t been anywhere in the Holy City aside from the main streets, so this was a learning experience for me. As we entered the slums, we crossed from one street to another, and it was almost unbelievable how quickly things went from pristine to decrepit.

Then I lost my breath.

Puddles of blood dotted the road like a pox. We continued on, pushing through the crowds while I prepared a chant. How many people had been hurt to have spilled this much? How many lives were in danger? How many lives were already lost?

Past the throng of people was a beastman standing in front of a group of several others as if protecting them. Blood stained them all. He was frozen, like he’d passed out standing up. I approached him and prepared to cast Area High Heal.

“Watch out!”

I reacted to the voice too late. The knife plunged into my side. He’d caught me completely off guard. Call me crazy, but I wasn’t prepared to be stabbed by someone who was unconscious as I tried to heal him and his people. It hurt like hell, but he’d missed my vitals. Still, Nanaella, Monica, and a little girl who needed my help were behind me. Now was the time to be strong.

“Okay, that hurts,” I whimpered. “Wow, that hurts. All right, *screw this*, everyone’s getting healed!”

As it turned out, it was very hard to “be strong” with a knife in your side. I yanked it out, tears in my eyes, and cast Area High Heal. That way, the beastpeople around us wouldn’t be in any danger either. I’d already cast myself

dry at the guildhall, though, and this pushed me to my absolute limits.

“Luciel!” Nanaella cried. “Are you okay?!”

“Did he just stab you?!” Monica shouted.

“Looks like he was unconscious, so let’s say I gave him that one,” I joked.

I was happy that they were worried about me but also kind of pissed off. Then again, yelling at the person I’d just saved wasn’t a good look either. Neither was complaining in front of a kid. I took a deep breath.

“I’m real sorry, Saint Weirdo,” Grantz said, “the fella went right under my nose.”

“It’s okay; you haven’t been in the field for a while. And you couldn’t have sensed his intentions while he was unconscious. I know I didn’t.”

I’d nearly forgotten that the guildmaster was supposed to be guarding us. I doubted whether he would have been able to react in time even if he had seen the knife coming. From his build, the man appeared to be more of a hard-hitter than a speedster.

I chugged another potion, cast Purification on myself and the blood-soaked beastpeople to clean us off, and then added a quick casting of Recover for any status debuffs, just to be safe.

I sighed. “Okay, so no one’s lives should be in any danger now. We need to get these people somewhere safe. I think the Adventurer’s Guild would be best.”

“Smart thinkin’. Anyone with a free hand, get to haulin’! Take these folks to the Adventurer’s Guild!”

Nearby adventurers and able-bodied beastpeople started carrying the wounded at Grantz’s orders. The little girl accompanied the man who had stabbed me. Her father, perhaps.

I suddenly found myself surrounded by local residents prostrating themselves before me.

“Um, do you all need something?”

“Please,” one of them begged, “save us.”

It must have looked like I’d healed everyone there out of the goodness of my heart, expecting nothing in return. But I could easily get into trouble if I went around giving handouts.

“I’m no savior. I only heal injuries, fix stomachaches, cure poisons, that sort of thing,” I explained.

“Are you going to heal these people for free?” Nanaella asked.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Luciel,” Monica warned.

“No, not for free. How would you all feel about making a deal?”

Nobody was going to be healed without agreeing to a few conditions first.

*

Unbeknownst to Luciel, whose hands were fairly full with the situation at hand, the guildmaster had assigned several other adventurers to guard them as they entered the slums. And the scene that had just played out before them stirred their emotions.

“Did you see that? That guy stabbed Saint Weirdo! He blew a fuse but healed everyone anyway!”

“Any normal healer woulda died or passed out.”

“They sure as hell wouldn’t have been able to cast spells.”

“They wouldn’t even have tried. Like they’d ever bother healing beastfolk.”

“But it had to’ve hurt. Didn’tcha hear? He said so himself.”

“The guy’s a freakin’ zombie, for real. It’s like nothing stops him.”

“Man, we’d have been in a bad way if he bit it here, huh?”

“That’s for sure. I can’t even count how many of us he’s saved. Those beastfolk wouldn’t have made it without him.”

“Probably. It’s easy to forget since he’s so young, but that armor means he must be a pretty important guy in the Church. I hear he’s in with the Valkyries too.”

“It could’ve been a mob of human supremacists who lynched those poor people.”

“We oughta keep an eye out or he could wind up in trouble.”

“Let’s keep our ears to the ground.”

And so Luciel set about healing the residents of the slum, completely unaware of the machinations of those behind him.

*

Nanaella, Monica, and I were chatting in a cafe near the Adventurer’s Guild that I frequently ordered food supplies from as I took a break from all the healing.

“I’m sorry you two came all the way out here just to get wrapped up in this madness.”

“Don’t mind us. That’s who you are,” Nanaella said comfortingly.

“Honestly, I wish you’d worry about yourself more,” Monica chastised me. “When I saw that knife in you...I nearly lost it.”

I was relieved that they didn’t seem to think I had changed after all this time. The three of us, comrades-in-arms, could still talk as we used to. Behind Monica’s smile, she never stopped being worried sick about me. While I’d been healing the people in the slum, she wouldn’t let me out of her sight and kept asking how I felt. I could count on one hand the number of people in this city who cared about me that much. Her and Nanaella’s coming must have been a gift from God. A little surprise from Monsieur Luck to help bolster my courage before the fortieth-floor boss.

“I’m sorry to worry you. Truth be told, I never thought something like that would ever happen to me, but I’ll be careful from now on.”

“We’re not fishing for apologies. Are we, Monica?”

“Nope. Just let us be worried.”

At least they weren’t upset with me.

“Sorry for the wait.” A waitress arrived with our drinks, so I took the

opportunity to change the subject.

“What are you both doing out here anyway? I can’t imagine it’s easy for the guild to get by without two of its receptionists.”

“Exactly. Just think about how busy it’s going to get after the weddings.”

“We wanted to come visit while we still had the time.”

I felt my stomach drop at the word “weddings.” But wait, if they were worried about things at the guild getting busy, were they not the ones getting married? I had to be sure.

“So, who are the lucky girls?”

They looked at each other, then Nanaella answered, “Melina and Mernell.”

“We’ve sent you letters, Luciel. Have you not been reading them?”

I felt myself tense up. “What?! You’ve been writing to me? I haven’t gotten a single reply to my own letters, so I was about to stop trying. I thought I was being a bother.”

“Wait, you’ve sent letters to us?! I haven’t seen a single one!” Monica replied in shock.

“Me neither.”

What in the world was going on? Not a single one of our letters had made it to the other?

“I’ve been writing Master regular updates on how things have been going for me.”

“Oh, I remember Brod seeming particularly happy one time,” Nanaella recalled. “I think he got one letter, but nothing else.”

“Grantz, the guildmaster here, should be sending them to the Merratoni Adventurer’s Guild.”

“We’ve addressed ours to the Holy City Adventurer’s Guild since the Church doesn’t accept mail.”

Probably to prevent information leaks.

“They’re taking our money to send those letters and you haven’t received anything?”

“Nothing. This sounds like an issue to bring up with the guild,” I grumbled. “Well, we’re all here now, so let’s catch up.”

I couldn’t tell them about the labyrinth or my job, but I told them Brod would’ve been proud that I’d been keeping up with my training, told them I’d started practicing my horsemanship, and how my new nickname—Saint Weirdo—had originated. They, in turn, filled me in on what had happened in Merratoni since my departure.

After lunch, I showed them around a few streets and shops I knew. Our time together was short but precious.

As it turned out, the culprit in the case of the missing letters was the guildmaster himself. I dropped by the place infrequently, and when I *did* visit and asked for a delivery, it always turned into a party, at which point he would completely forget to put in the request for me. And the rare occasions where he didn’t forget, Nanaella and Monica’s fan club would flat-out refuse to take the job.

Several other adventurers were implicated in the guildmaster’s crime, and for their wrongdoing they would be punished with a pitcher of Substance X, to be administered by Milty, the vice guildmaster.

Nanaella and Monica were staying in the city for three nights, so I decided I was going to spend as much time with them as possible for the duration of their stay. My plans, however, never went the way I wanted, and they encouraged me to keep accepting requests at the guild, so I ended up healing in the training grounds and purifying cesspits in the slums to combat a local plague.

The people of the slums flinched at the sight of my white robe, but Nanaella and Monica’s presence helped to soothe their nerves. I was merely holding up my end of the deal by cleaning their homes and treating their people, yet idolizers still insisted on extolling my name. This couldn’t be my responsibility forever, though, and I had to make that clear.

“Please don’t expect me to do this anymore, everyone,” I announced. “This

was a one-time public service, so hopefully this bit of sanitation will give you all some peace of mind against the epidemic. But you have to *keep* things sanitary or it won't help anything long term."

One thing I'd learned from my time in the slums was that it was an active community of people who were willing to work. If they all banded together, they could break the cycle that kept their hovel down.

"One kindness begets another, and that begets another, and the chain goes on. I believe that's how we create a better world. And that's why I want you all to work together to make your home a better, cleaner place. I know you can do it."

The time the girls and I spent together during their visit wasn't especially unique or noteworthy. We just worked. That was all. I knew it wasn't right for them to be working so hard during their vacation, but they seemed to enjoy themselves all the same.

Next time, though, I had to show them a good time. I would make sure of it.

After finishing up my work at the guildhall one day, I was called to Grantz's room.

"Um, could you all please get off the ground? I swear, I'm completely fine now. And I'd prefer to not have any more ridiculous rumors spread about me."

A group of beastpeople had bowed down in front of me with their heads pressed to the floor, and holy crap was it awkward. I'd have taken fighting the undead over this spectacle any day. I heaved a sigh.

"I'm simply ashamed beyond words that I brought harm to such a prominent and noble healer. Not even my life could right this wrong."

"Yeah, no, I don't want it. And frankly, you shouldn't throw it away right after you got it back," I said flatly. "And, um, what was it you said you all were? Representatives of Yenice?"

"Yes. You're too kind."

The independent city-state known as Yenice was unique in its lack of blatant

discrimination and was run by representatives of various kinds of beastpeople who were elected once every two years. These particular representatives were in a difficult situation because they hadn't been attacked by monsters but rather assaulted by other people.

"Just to be absolutely sure, you don't know anything about who attacked you or why?"

"No. We only came to request the establishment of a Healer's Guild in our own country."

"You're foreign dignitaries and no one was sent out to meet you?" Their attackers were almost certainly human supremacists. Or a group who had something to gain from keeping Yenice devoid of healers.

"We received an offer, but we didn't want to make an event of our arrival, so we refused," the representative explained. "Our only objective was an audience with the pope."

"I see." I decided to leave Yenice's affairs to Yenice. There were likely complicated historical contexts behind all this, and it wasn't my place to get involved in foreign politics. "Where exactly were you attacked?"

"A band of thugs descended on us just outside the city walls. They were well-organized and disciplined. One wrong move could have been our last."

"Disciplined, eh? I smell a plot," the guildmaster rumbled.

"I'm just a healer, so there isn't much I can do about that. But I'm impressed you all managed to make it out okay."

"Yes, we were very lucky. It was only thanks to the arrival of some adventurers and a well-timed attack by a flock of flying monsters."

That explained all the adventurers who had been injured lately. I couldn't do a whole lot to help combat airborne enemies other than heal their victims, but thankfully things seemed to be calming down.

"So, any luck with getting that audience?" I asked.

"We recently concluded our talks. Safely, this time."

They were already done? Then what was I here for? To listen to their apology

in Grantz's place like some scapegoat?

I side-eyed the guildmaster. Nanaella and Monica were leaving tomorrow, and I was stuck here playing diplomat. Better safe than sorry, though.

"Just in case, I have to recommend you be extra careful on your way home. Maybe hire some bodyguards until you reach the border. You could be assaulted again, or they could easily cook something up and accuse *you* of being bandits."

"You really think that's possible?" the beastman asked fearfully.

Truthfully, I didn't think it was *that* serious, but they had to be careful. Their safety wasn't assured.

"You might even want to stay here at the guildhall for a while and ask an adventurer to deliver the news ahead of you."

"That makes sense. If our talks can be finalized, any would-be ruffians would lose their motive to attack."

They had a small girl with them as well, so I figured caution would be wise.

"If your budget allows, when you hire your guards, you should have the guildmaster choose his best and most trusted."

"You believe all this is necessary?"

"Yes, I do," I said firmly. "I have a lot of beastfolk friends—people I owe a lot to. I wouldn't want them or any of you to become victims of racism in this country. I've heard it runs deep even within the Church itself."

"That's...unfortunate to hear. Thank you for your advice."

"Not at all. If you could handle it from here, Guildmaster, I have things to do now."

"No problem," Grantz replied. "Thanks again for all the help, pal."

"And thank you for all that information on the undead. I might not be able to come back for a while, so make sure to be careful. Until next time, everyone."

As I turned to leave, I saw the mute little wolf-girl who had stopped me in front of the guildhall. Sheila was her name, and she'd lost her vocal cords in an

accident long before. She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me tight. Something about me and wolf-people just seemed to click.

“You’re a hero, Sheila. You saved everyone,” I told her. “Keep your head high and don’t ever let fate decide who you are.”

I tried to cast a healing spell on her in vain, knowing full well that it was beyond my capabilities, then left the guildmaster’s room.

I went downstairs, where I found Nanaella and Monica surrounded by local adventurers.

“They’re with me,” I said loudly, in a deep voice that surprised even myself. “Is there a problem?”

“There he is,” one of the adventurers said. “Say, which one of them’s your girl? It’s gotta be one of ‘em, right? They came all the way out here just for you.”

“I mean, it can’t be both. *Two* beautiful Merratoni receptionists? Please tell me it’s not both,” another begged.

“It’s gotta be the money. Or maybe his looks? Man, how the hell else is he this popular with the nicknames he’s got!”

That last one’s rudeness aside, at least they weren’t giving the ladies themselves any trouble. But now Nanaella and Monica wouldn’t stop staring at me.

“They’re both important to me. They’re the reason I am where I am today,” I declared. “Without them, I wouldn’t have made it through Master Brod’s training or continued to drink Substance X.”

“Wait, did he just say ‘Brod’? The Whirlwind?”

“You’re shittin’ me! His master’s a dragonslayer?!”

“So, *they’re* the reason he can drink that garbage, eh? Yeah, we’re out of our league.”

“You couldn’t pay me to drink that stuff. You’ve found yourselves a good man, ladies.”

Everyone started smiling at the pair. Why? I had no idea (I never did), but everyone was enjoying themselves, so what was the harm?

Later on, the guildmaster treated me to dinner as an apology for the incident involving the letters, which then turned into a full banquet. When the fervor reached its peak, Substance X started to make its rounds, knocking people out and quieting things down enough for the girls and me to talk by ourselves.

“Sorry, guys. This is a bit rowdy for a vacation, huh?”

“Please, don’t even say that. We heard all about how hard you’ve been working from the guildmaster and his adventurers.”

“Nana’s right. Be proud that you’ve earned the respect of so many people. That’s not easy to do for a healer, as I’m sure you know.”

I was filled with nostalgic joy. They used to cheer me up just like this back in Merratoni. It was what had carried me through Brod’s training.

“I’m really happy you came.”

“And we’re happy you’re doing well for yourself.”

“Just please try not to make too many enemies at the Church. The rumors I heard when I worked at the Healer’s Guild were never good.”

It was probably a bit late for that, but I felt revitalized now. Like I could take on the whole labyrinth.

“I’m doing everything I can to be able to get back to Merratoni someday. I promise.”

We chatted for a while longer before I escorted them to their inn and returned to HQ.

The next morning, I went to see the girls off.

“Thank you both for coming out here. It was great seeing you again. Next time, I’ll be the one to visit.”

The few days they’d been here had undoubtedly been hard enough on the Merratoni guild. I couldn’t imagine they would have time to visit again in the

near future. And as for me, I had a feeling my descent into the labyrinth was about to get a whole lot more hectic. I'd need to do a ton of training, both physical and magical, if I wanted to make it through.

"Don't stretch yourself too thin," Nanaella insisted.

"You listen to her. And don't worry, we'll make sure you get our letters from now on."

"I'll keep the pressure on the guildmaster here. Oh, but just so you know, things may get extra busy at work soon, so I might not be able to write as often. I'll save my stories for when I see you, though."

"We'll be waiting," they replied together.

I felt my lips tighten into a smile. I couldn't thank them enough. "Tell Master I'm keeping up with my training and that I'm still planning to land a hit on him."

"Is it just me or do you seem more mature lately?" Nanaella observed.

"You think so? I'll take that as a compliment."

"But that's no excuse to take on more than you can handle, okay?"

"Of course. Don't worry, I've had enough of being stabbed."

I watched their carriage pull away from the city, heading back to Merratoni. Milty had organized a B-rank party of women to escort them, and I offered her my thanks.

After the carriage disappeared from view, I went about gathering food supplies for my next stay in the labyrinth. The place's days were numbered.

Of course, it went without saying that I stocked up on extra Substance X as well.

After a meal in the HQ dining hall, I set out for the labyrinth. Cattleya was already at the counter by the time I arrived.

"Oh, are you just now heading down?"

"Yeah. And I feel like I'm constantly on a bed of needles out here, so I was thinking about living there for, say, half a year or so."

“You must be an idiot if you think I’m going to let you do that,” she retorted.

“I figured as much. But ever since I helped to clean up the slums, I’ve started to stand out more than I’d like. Everywhere I go, I have this anxious feeling. I need to get stronger or I’m going to end up assaulted at best, assassinated at worst.”

“I can speak with Her Holiness, if you’d like.”

“Please do. What a sad world this is if all it takes to be hated is being kind to people.”

“A sad world indeed.”

“Well, anyway, I’m going down. I’ll be careful.”

“Come back safe.”

I opened the doors and stepped into my training grounds.

Two months had passed since Nanaella and Monica’s visit, and I’d made significant progress with my preparations against the fourth boss, but I still couldn’t shake the chills I got when I thought about actually challenging it.

I was currently riding Forêt Noire, the one horse who would let me sit on its back, to take my mind off things for a bit.

“What am I doing being scared of the unknown like I’m on my deathbed or something?”

“Does the unknown frighten you?”

“Uh, Forêt? Did you just talk?”

“Ever the dullard, Luciel.”

I recognized the voice and turned around. “Oh, Miss Lumina. Back from your deployment?”

“Indeed, but not for long. We’re off to the Illumasian border shortly. And I believe I told you the ‘miss’ was unnecessary when we first met.”

What brought on this change?

“Oh, right. Um...” I faltered. “It sounds like you guys have it rough.”

“Such is my duty. But what about you, Luciel? What troubles you?”

Lumina knew about the labyrinth, so maybe it was okay to vent to her.

“It’s the main chamber on the fortieth floor. I’m expecting an extremely powerful knight to be waiting for me there, and I don’t know if I’d even stand a chance.”

“You’re a timid one, Luciel, but I don’t think this is necessarily a shortcoming. The labyrinth is worthy of caution. It takes lives. But if uncertainty is your concern, what say you to a sparring match?”

“You’d do that for me? But you’re about to be deployed again.”

“Indulge me. I am curious to see what you’ve learned during your year at the Church.”

“I’ll take you up on the offer, then.”

I returned Forêt to the stables, not forgetting to thank my partner for his help, then came back to meet Lumina’s challenge.

“I’m not going to hold back, Lumina. I want your best.”

“Big talk. Show me you have what it takes to back it up!”

Lumina’s blade was instantly upon me. I funneled magic into my sword and shield, magically augmented my body beyond its normal limits, and blocked the blow with everything I had. The clang of metal on metal had just reached my ears before I saw her second attack coming. I hurled my shield at her and summoned a second one.

She was faster than me in every way. A full-frontal assault would never succeed. My only hope was to be crafty.

I threw my sword, and then a dagger immediately after that. Lumina shouted in surprise, hesitating just enough to save my hide. And thank goodness for that. Cheap tricks were all I had up my sleeve, and if she’d kept steamrolling me, I would’ve lost immediately.

I was in awe of her skill, amazed that she’d pushed me to use my Physical

Enhancement technique so defensively. Lumina was incredible.

“I’m impressed, Luciel. You’re even stronger than I expected.”

“The feeling’s mutual. Here I thought I might’ve been closing the gap between us, but not even Physical Enhancement was enough to match your speed. I was getting a little cocky there.” She still felt slower than Brod, though.

“So, that’s the technique you were using,” she mused. “I want you to take the offensive this time. Go on, come at me.”

I had a bad feeling about it but no say in the matter. “If you insist.”

I barraged her with attacks, Physical Enhancement working at full force, but not a single hit came even close to landing. She coached me as we sparred.

“You’re giving away your feints with your eyes.”

“Your strikes are too linear and easy to parry.”

“Using Physical Enhancement is smart, but you’re losing flexibility.”

Our match quickly devolved into a crash course in combat.

“You’re making impressive progress,” Lumina commented afterwards, “especially considering it’s been less than a year, but I still think you should steer clear of strong opponents. At least until you have better control of your body while it’s being enhanced.”

Hold on, is she speaking more casually now? When did that happen?

“I appreciate the advice. I’ve been working on better controlling Physical Enhancement, but now I have a clearer picture of what to aim for.”

“I feel strength in you, Luciel. Keep working towards those goals of yours.”

“I will. Also, why are you talking differently?”

Red instantly flooded her face, and she turned away. “I’m unused to speaking with a tone of authority,” she confessed. “I am working at it, but it requires my attention or, well, as you saw...”

“I don’t think it’s so bad letting your hair down, so to speak. It suits you.”

“I will...remember that. But there is a woman I admire, a fellow knight, and this is how she carries herself.”

“I understand. If you ever want to relax and just let yourself talk, though, I’m always here.”

“Thank you, I...I may do that.”

“Any time.”

The next day, Lumina and her Valkyries departed for the border once again.

06 — Struggle Against the Newly-Dubbed Lich Knight

Half a year had passed since my reunion with Lumina. In that time, my direct superior had shifted from being Granhart to the pope herself. Anything I needed to conquer the labyrinth, aside from additional personnel, was immediately provided. I also started buying entire potloads of food from my favorite store when I came up for my monthly supply runs.

I had just finished today's training and was drinking my Substance X while mentally preparing myself for tomorrow's task: the battle that would decide it all.

I'd had some ideas about who my next opponents might be, so Cattleya had passed along information from the pope regarding those potential adversaries. One was a paladin captain with immense magical power, and a wielder of both healing magic and a mighty greatsword. The other was a templar captain whose unparalleled spearmanship had carried him through the ranks. The paladin captain and I probably shared a fighting style, but I felt no desire whatsoever to meet the templar captain.

That said, I wasn't afraid. Blades had lost their edge for me after all the cuts and bruises I'd suffered from Brod. My fights with adventurers had dulled the tips of spears. And on top of all that, I had healing magic. Sure, it hurt, but as long as I avoided any hits to the vitals, I could heal anything almost instantly, so I wasn't afraid.

"Those first steps are always the hardest, though."

The Valkyries were the only ones who let me train with them. The other seven knight regiments treated me like chopped liver, and my bit of community service at the slums hadn't helped my reputation. Complaints flew in from clinics all over the city, but one perk of working directly under the pope was that I didn't have to respond to them.

Ever since the incident in the slum, Granhart and Jord had been avoiding me like the plague. Actually, just about all my human interaction, other than Cattleya and the usual serving lady from the dining hall, had essentially

evaporated. And I was keeping it that way. I wasn't charismatic or strong, and I didn't have an impressive position to hide behind, so the more people I involved myself with, the more trouble I'd be getting both them and myself into.

"Man, I'm still such a wuss," I sighed in frustration. "I can handle the lack of attention. It's just the whole assassination and physical assault thing that freaks me out."

But kicking myself would get me nowhere. I focused my mind on what awaited me tomorrow. What was more effective against a team of two, cleansing magic or Area High Heal? Would they even let me close enough to try the latter?

Unease filled my mind as I visualized the battle in my head. And then a thought came to me. Taking too much illusory damage in this labyrinth would probably lead to my "death." And that "death" would probably hurt as much as actually dying. An image of my corpse flashed across my mind and the pope's words rang out in my head.

"Oh, Luciel, death should not have taken thee!" she would surely say. And then she would revive me with a sober expression, or perhaps she'd smile. Regardless, I'd be utterly ruined. I'd have even less of a place at the Church than I did now, and that was saying something. This was all, of course, assuming I wouldn't straight up bite the dust.

According to Cattleya, there were two paladin regiments and one templar regiment in particular that had it out for me. I was genuinely considering making, like, a hundred adventurer friends to protect me once this labyrinth ordeal was done with. But then again, my relationship with Nanaella and Monica probably made me a target for some of them too.

I sighed. I was less than a day out from one of the most important battles of my life, and my brain just would not stop chugging. I braced myself for a sleepless night, filled with plenty of tossing and turning, but my Angel's Pillow quickly carried me off into a pleasant slumber.

The next morning, I dashed through the labyrinth and stopped in front of the

boss door on the fortieth floor.

“Feeling good. Got my weapons and armor. Magic bag’s good to go. Barrier magic is up. I’m all ready. Just Substance X left now.” After a quick run-through of my mental checklist, I downed my usual mug. “Phew, man, that does *not* hit the spot.”

I steeled myself and opened the door.

“Sure is dark in here,” I muttered as the door slammed shut, sealing itself behind me.

Then I saw the undead figure before me and froze.

My newest enemy had a massive greatsword and spear crossed over its back, both nearly three meters long, while the monster itself towered at a similar height. Where its full armor didn’t protect it, only thick bone could be seen. If it were up to me to name such a beast, I would have dubbed it something fittingly sinister. It was no “knight of death.” It was a master of the undead. A “lich knight.”



Its fighting style, the use of both sword and spear, was the very same that I myself had attempted.

“Way to be original. But unfortunately for you, I know all about the disadvantages of fighting that way.”

What I was about to witness was surely the perfected form of the Sword-and-Spear Style. The lich knight was above me in every way. I knew that, but I challenged it nonetheless.

The knight’s blade tore through the air, creating a whirlwind. It would thrust its spear at me not once, but three, sometimes upwards of five times, in rapid succession, at inhuman speeds made possible only by its lack of sinew and tendons...just like this one manga I vaguely recalled reading in my past life.

This monster was incredibly powerful yet strangely human. My usual strategy of Purification and healing magic proved completely ineffective. It simply enveloped my magical energy in darkness and used it to heal any damage the spell had done. Physical damage, though, was permanent. Just like for a human.

“Things are going to keep getting worse at this rate. I would kill for a break right about now,” I panted. “Wait, I just had a crazy idea.”

I went into a corner of the room and lined up three barrels of Substance X between me and the monster. It lowered its stance, moved to the center of the room, and slowly returned its weapons to its back, its eyes never leaving me.

“What is this, some third-rate comedy act? What in the world *is* Substance X? Not that I’m gonna look this gift horse in the mouth.”

I took a deep breath and analyzed the situation. There *had* to be a way to win.

How long had I been fighting this thing? I couldn’t even say at this point. I’d stocked up on provisions to last me more than half a year and I was starting to run low.

No one was coming for me. I was alone, and if this kept up, my worst enemy wasn’t going to be the lich knight, but starvation. In fact, my foe was already

the least of my worries thanks to a highly advanced healing spell that I'd learned from a grimoire I'd recently found in a treasure chest.

I was now well past the point of thinking that all of this, the labyrinth and the monsters, were illusions. This fight was real. My slowly dwindling supply of food and Substance X was real. My dismembered arms, the holes in my legs, and every twinge of agonizing pain were all real.

I had underestimated the lich knight and it nearly broke me more times than I could count. But I stood back up every time. I faced that monster with fierce determination. All because of three letters. Because of Nanaella, Monica, and Lumina. They gave me the will to live—the resolve to give up on giving up.

“Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy for an angelic breath and restore this form. Come to me, machinations of life. Extra Heal!”

My left arm, which had been severed along with my shield, quickly re-formed. My leg, currently in pieces all over the room, grew anew.

I forced myself to get some sleep inside the safe zone that I'd cordoned off with Substance X. I had to recover my strength and fill my belly in order to recover the lost blood, which no amount of magic could restore.

Once, when I had lost myself to temptation, I had tried using Extra Heal on the lich knight, hoping that it would save the day. It did not, however. The knight went absolutely berserk, and things quickly got out of hand. It was like a video game boss powering up in the last phase of a fight when his HP was running low. The lich knight would not abide any exploits. Fighting fair and square was my only option. What else was a healer to do?

At some point during the fight, all of my shields ended up battered and useless, so I took out my spear and decided to make the best of things. If I couldn't defend myself, I was going to at least use this chance to learn the Sword-and-Spear Style from the master himself.

I remembered my first master's words and repeated them in my head: no matter how strong the opponent, a sword in the neck was still a sword in the neck. I recalled my time in this world, what I was striving for, what I endeavored to be, and every painfully small step that I had taken along the way. Because

those steps, however minuscule they may have been, were all a guy like me could manage.

My undead adversary, for all its ferocity, brimmed with a knightly dignity. It was noble, like the hero of a story. My new master couldn't speak, but I wondered if it could sense my growth and everything that I'd gone through.

I parried its greatsword and kicked the creature away, channeling my magic into my spear. My master wasn't one to let things go, though, and thrust the end of its spear into the ground, using it to swing back towards me. But I was one step ahead and pivoted around behind it where I thrust out my magically-charged sword.

This dance was one we had practiced together ad nauseam. The knight's patterns were drilled into me, pain and all. Monsters' attacks were generally predictable, even from one type to another, and I'd gone through the motions with this one over and over. I knew everything it could dish out.

I felt tears well up in my eyes. Was it grief, knowing that my master was about to vanish from this world? Joy that success was in reach? Pride in my growth?

My blade glowed with magic as it pierced the lich knight's neck. Its head fell to the floor and its body crumpled. It suddenly burst into miasma, leaving a large stone, a grimoire, a greatsword, and a long spear behind. But that wasn't all. I found another sword and spear as well, almost perfectly sized for me, as well as its helmet, chestplate, gauntlets, chausses, and greaves, all assembled and standing before me. They had previously been a sinister black but now glistened in a brilliant, pale white.

The lich knight was a monster, but I bowed in reverence.

"Thank you for everything, Master." Before I could even finish speaking, a rumbling announced the opening of the next staircase. "Oh, for the love of... Could I just have this moment, please?"

My horribly long struggle had at last come to an end. My friends must have been worried sick after not hearing from me for half a year.

"Time to head home. Er, what's going on?" As sloppy as it was, I had definitely beaten the fourth boss, but when I went to open the door that led back

upstairs, it wouldn't budge. "This couldn't be because my master died...could it?"

I was trapped, with nowhere to go but down.

07 — Always Cheat on Time Trials

The new monsters on floor forty-one were undead beasts like horses, wolves, and tigers. I didn't know their actual names; it was easier to call it as I saw them. An appraisal skill of some sort would have been handy right about now.

Undead horses with melted bodies, enshrouded in a purplish-red aura, trotted through the halls. The muffled howls of wolves that were made of pure, thick bone (none of which were good boys) shook the walls. Catlike monsters with saber teeth scraped the floors with their knife-like claws. I'd read quite a few monster encyclopedias, but these creatures were brand new to me.

There were also larger wraiths and crimson-eyed death knights, but that was the extent of the threat that faced me. After half a year of fighting the lich knight, these guys felt almost agonizingly slow in comparison. And the wraiths were certainly bigger, but I was still immune to their magic.

As I encountered new monsters in the depths, not one posed a single problem, making clearing the labyrinth before I starved to death my primary concern aside from watching out for traps.

I was convinced that the reason I hadn't been allowed to turn back at the fortieth floor was because the final boss room awaited me on the fiftieth. I *had* to believe that or I might have lost my mind.

Regardless, I was dangerously low on food and couldn't afford to take things slow like I had been doing before. So I thought up the stupidest exploit imaginable.

"Please work."

Operation Substance X March was a go, and it was going to take a lot of luck and prayer to pull it off. I removed the lid from one of the barrels and tied it securely around my waist with a spare holy silver robe that I had. Then I marched on. The idea was to use it to repel monsters and make it all the way down to the next boss without actually having to fight anything along the way.

The undead hordes spotted me, paused for a moment, then turned right back around and fled. It was particularly effective against animal-types. All I had to

do was walk around, believing in my gut and Monsieur Luck, and I came across several treasure chests and downward paths with minimal effort.

“Okay, I didn’t expect it to be *that* easy. Now I’m kinda scared.”

I was enjoying the fruits of my ridiculous plan, which had frankly been one step away from pure gambling, and was having a last supper in front of the fiftieth-floor boss room. The smell wafting from the open barrels I’d sealed off the area with was horrendously pungent. There were no monsters in sight.

“It’s not going to be funny if I wake up and get turned into a zombie right at the end.”

I rested my head on my Angel’s Pillow for what would likely be my last night in the labyrinth. There was a disturbingly real chance that the next morning would be my last one alive. If I couldn’t beat the final boss, I would merely become another zombie roaming the halls.

I had assumed that my inability to level up meant that this place was fake, but I’d only made it through my battle with the lich knight with all of my limbs intact because of Extra Heal. Without such an advanced healing spell, I certainly would have died. And not in the hyperbolic sense. This magic was nowhere in the grimoires I’d gotten from Her Holiness, and I was likely the only healer at HQ who could cast it.

The labyrinth was real. There was no other explanation. If I hadn’t doubted that in the beginning, I’d have called it quits right after the first boss fight. The only thing that kept me from trembling in fear now was the looming threat of starvation if I didn’t press on.

I closed my eyes. One way or another, tomorrow was the end.

I usually woke up gradually, but today of all days I was startled awake by the distinct stench of Substance X.

“That stuff sure is handy. It even works as an alarm clock.”

I poured one last mug to brace myself. And with no food left, that was all the preparation I had.

“I did everything I could. If it all comes to nothing, I’ll surrender with dignity,” I vowed. “Yeah, right. To hell with dignity! I’ll crawl through muck and grime to make it back alive! I didn’t think I had a shot at beating the lich knight, but here I am! And the pope still owes me that fabulous prize!”

I took a deep breath and prepared for battle. There was no creaking from the doors this time. They swung open with a deep, violent quaking.

“I expected no less.”

The doors slammed shut and locked as usual when I reached the middle of the room. There to meet me was the final wight, and it was anything but ordinary. Built like an orc, it had a commanding presence befitting a title like “king,” or maybe “lord.” It was about the height of the lich knight, but it outweighed the knight with its sheer girth.

Among all the monsters I had fought, I’d never seen a creature so grotesque. In most respects it was a normal wight, except for the writhing faces that covered its body and robe.

“I’m gonna be sick.”

Like the center of a vortex, it seemed to have absorbed countless undead creatures and knights of the Church into a gelatinous amalgamation. I knew that rushing would only cause me to lose my head, but I was a firm believer in the philosophy of “the early bird gets the worm.” Accelerating my magical energy within me, I leaped into action.

Cleansing magic wasn’t worth the effort, not against the sheer mass of this thing. And especially not after the last boss had flown into a rage when I’d tried it. The faces shifting around my new enemy’s form made me think my only shot at winning was with something far bigger and stronger.

Countless imaginings from my past life, fantasies and creatures from every kind of fiction, were real in this world, and enemies like this one tended to be invincible as long as they had the means to recover. Sometimes it was by magic, but in this case my opponent was probably strengthened by the various entities it had absorbed.

Plus, well, this was the fiftieth floor. It was undoubtedly going to be leagues

above the wights that I'd fought before. I would need all my strength and more to knock this king off its throne.

"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Heed my prayer. Take my energy for an angelic breath and mend the beings of this realm. Area High Heal!"

Moments after my chant ended, the boss's arm elongated and came crashing down towards me, catching me by surprise and sending me flying.

"Oof, wow," I winced. "Thank god I jumped aside."

When it rains, it pours, though. Several faces lurched forward from its outstretched arm and morphed into multiple red-eyed death knights and wraiths.

"Her Holiness really undersold how dangerous conquering this place would be."

The now-missing portion of the boss's arm quickly regenerated and returned to normal. The new death knights had to be dealt with first, so I paralyzed them with Purification and made quick work of them. As always, the wraiths' dark magic was little more than a nuisance.

But those were hardly my only threats. The boss itself wouldn't sit around while I took care of the stragglers, and the magic it hurled at me was anything but meager, although it *was* familiar. These were the same rays of darkness that the first boss had used on me. The very same ones that had sent agonizing pain through me after only a slight graze.

Dammit! I cast the spell left to me by my second master, the lich knight.
"Sanctuary Circle!"

A magic runic circle appeared beneath me and began to radiate light. As I downed a high-level potion, bringing me back from the brink of magical exhaustion, I reveled in the strength of my new spell.

"Not knowing what they do until I actually try it out really sucks, though." The king wight's rays of darkness dissipated as they passed through the circle. "Is this barrier magic? No, it couldn't be..."

The undead around me were erupting in bluish-white flames the instant they touched the edge of it. This spell had cost a whopping one hundred MP. Add an extra fifty percent to that from Free Casting it and my magic was running dangerously low.

About a minute later, the circle vanished. I'd been hoarding points since the thirtieth floor, so Cattleya had recommended I spend them on the highest-level potions I could afford. And honestly, I didn't think I would ever have to use them. I hadn't needed them before, not even for the lich knight (why bother when I could just take a break in the corner?). Now, though, they were a godsend.

I finished my potion and cut down the extra monsters after casting Purification.

"Damn, all I'm doing is buying time here!"

The king wight, now cautious of me, cast its spells from a safe distance. Although Sanctuary Circle nullified its magic, my own wouldn't last if things continued this way.

"It's not like me to be pushed into a corner. Guess I'll just have to finish this quickly!"

I dashed towards the boss and chanted, *"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy and shield me in ramparts of angelic light. Engulf impurity in a bastion of radiance. Sanctuary Circle!"*

As the words left my lips, I felt magical energy flow from within me. But while the sensation normally left me as it escaped my body, I somehow, strangely, continued to feel my energy seep out of me and into the circle as it formed. I opened the dam further, pouring more and more magic out, and the more the circle beneath me absorbed, the wider it grew, reaching all the way to the king wight.

The wight severed the part of its leg that stood within the circle just as it began to shimmer, and an instant later, the detached limb was engulfed in white flames. Now legless, my enemy toppled over backwards.

Whether or not I had the magic for a follow-up attack, it was now or never.

This move would decide the battle.

I chugged another potion and slew the monsters around the boss with my sword and spear. What good that did, I couldn't say, but the king wight was clearly shrinking back to normal size.

Yet this wasn't the time to let my guard down. No, it was time for an experiment. I began to chant again, coalescing my magic not directly beneath me, but beyond me. I was going to create a magic circle at range.

When I'd first come to the Church, this technique had been beyond my grasp. Theoretically, one could create runes on any surface that one could see, to cast spells with. The grimoire had described Sanctuary Circle as the shield of all good, the hope of all things holy. It was impenetrable to the dark arts and anything wicked within it was set ablaze. However, like all shields, it had weak points. For instance, it was completely useless against aerial attacks.

Also, was it just me, or was it ironic that the Church so heavily associated itself with the term "magic"? When I heard "magic," I thought of witches, demons, and evil creatures normally persecuted by the Church, so wouldn't it have been better to call holy magic something like "the holy arts"? Unless warlocks were, somehow, swell folks to be around. But I digress.

What piqued my interest about the grimoire's description of the spell was the "anything wicked within it was set ablaze" part. And right now, the wight boss was stuck on the floor, so I simply placed the circle directly beneath it and cast the spell.

The creature shrieked in agony but only for a moment. Its body ignited, and as it smoldered there in the flames...

"That's...not possible..."

Within the flames, I thought I saw my enemy transform into an elderly priest, bathed in a holy aura and staring straight at me. Smiling. He whispered something and then was gone as quickly as he'd appeared.

My hair stood on end and I immediately vomited what little contents I had in my stomach. The labyrinth itself seemed to be toying with me, asking me a cruel question: what if every monster I'd fought on my way down had been like

that old man? No rest. Not even at the very end. However this dungeon had come to be, whatever sick bastard had made the place, they were no friend of mine.

My mood didn't improve, but while I waited for my drained MP to recover, I gathered the king wight's dropped items before taking a break. This boss hadn't left a magic stone (unless Sanctuary Circle had destroyed it). All that remained was a staff and grimoire. I purified both and placed the staff into my bag, then flipped open the book.

"Forbidden Magic of the Holy Variety," it read.

"This can't be what I think it is," I muttered.

My assumptions were correct. The spellbook detailed the chant, the effects, why it was forbidden...everything. I stashed it in my bag, conflicted over whether to present it to Her Holiness when the time came.

"Huh? Where's the rumbling? No more staircases? Unless..."

I prayed to Monsieur Luck for a nice, clichéd teleport back to the beginning, but I was well accustomed by now to the fact that life was never fair. There was no magic teleport. And the door I'd entered through had simply vanished.

"Well, I'm stuck. Or, what, is this where I starve myself until I cleanse my chakras of worldly desires?"

I had passed my limit long ago. On top of being exhausted from two boss fights in a row, my mind was churning. I sat down and let myself fall backwards.

"I'm so sick of this. Wake me up when I'm in a fluffy bed, please and thank you."

I took out my Angel's Pillow and took a very angry nap.

08 — The Labyrinth of Trials

When I awoke, my health and magic had fully recovered. I was extraordinarily grateful to the pope for that pillow.

I stood up and stretched, quickly noticing that something about the room had changed. Specifically, there was a gigantic door there now, far bigger than the one I'd entered through. Something about it was oddly soothing, like it emitted a pure, holy aura.

"It's like it's...drawing me in. Calling to something inside me."

I gently placed my hand against it. It immediately began to siphon my magic.

"Oh, come on! I was having a moment here!" My hand wouldn't budge. The door began to glow as it sapped my energy. "Let me go! Wait, what's happening?"

A luminescent pattern was forming on its surface. But I was dangerously close to running out of magic. When was this thing going to release me?

Just as I was about to run dry, it stopped. The entire door gleamed and swung open.

"I don't mean to jinx myself, but there better not be a *final* 'final boss.' Not like I've got much choice..."

With nowhere else to go, I stepped inside, downing yet another potion. Before long, I came to a short staircase. About halfway down, I felt something—something bad. Every alarm was sounding in my mind, every instinct screaming at me to go no farther. Goosebumps rose on every inch of my skin, and my knees went weak.

I squatted down to peek at what lay at the bottom. My gut was telling me to turn back, but I knew there would be nothing that way. I had to press on. I squinted and strained my eyes at the fifty-first floor.

"You're joking."

There was an undead dragon.

In this world, dragons came in different varieties, some lesser, some greater. This one was the latter. Lesser dragons had wings but were heavier and typically couldn't fly. Dragons like this one, however, were longer and could take to the skies with ease. There were also wyverns, which couldn't use breath attacks.

But this wasn't the place for a science lesson.

"I can't believe those things actually exist. How in the world am I supposed to beat a *dragon*?"

Half of the beast was pure charcoal black, like it had been carbonized, while the other half shimmered in an almost mystical white.

"A healer's supposed to beat that thing? Sure, it's undead but... Wait, it's undead. And it's just kinda lying there."

I noted several things. One: it wouldn't attack me from this far away. Two: dragons were intelligent and could supposedly speak. Three: it was possible that Sanctuary Circle could "unturn" the undead. Number three was a long shot, but it was worth trying. My only other option was to die down here, after all.

Whatever happened to living a peaceful life? What was I doing deep underground fighting dragons? Memories and unfulfilled promises rushed through my head.

"I'm not dying here. I can't."

I prepared a magic circle big enough to encompass the entire beast while chugging an especially fast-acting potion, amplifying it further by boosting my own energy. Once I'd crafted a sufficiently sturdy ring of runes, I said a silent prayer and cast Sanctuary Circle.

"Oh holy hand of healing. Oh birthing breath of the land. Take my energy and shield me in ramparts of angelic light. Engulf impurity in a bastion of radiance. Sanctuary Circle!"

Holy light erupted towards the ceiling, and the dragon finally stirred. It writhed and struggled to escape in vain, but the circle wouldn't let go.

Then the vast pillar of light was sucked into the beast.

“Don’t tell me it absorbed it.”

The dragon bellowed a mighty roar as a violent radiance burst forth from its body. Shortly after, it collapsed to the ground with a wall-shaking boom.

Never mind. Spoke too soon. “Does that mean...I beat it?”

It was still emitting a pale light as I approached, but the immense danger that I’d felt before was gone. In fact, my instincts now seemed to be urging me *towards* the beast.

Just as I got within arm’s reach, the glow suddenly dimmed, and I saw the creature’s enormous jaws pry themselves open before my eyes. This was it. There was no saving me now. All I could do was shut my eyes and wait for death.

But the pain never came.

I slowly opened my eyes again and met the dragon’s. It hadn’t eaten me. And holy crap, it was so freaking cool. The previously blackened part of its body was now as white as the other half.

It held my gaze and boomed slowly, “In a single attack, you have bested me. Well done. You have earned your reward. For you see, this labyrinth is one of trials. Pass through this arcane circle and you shall be blessed. I can think of none more worthy than a coward such as you. But be warned, you will not return here. Take all that you are able to.”

I finally spared a moment to look around the room. It was littered with money, weapons, armor, magic items, and miscellaneous, valuable trinkets of all kinds. Still, I had kind of cheesed him there. Was he not angry about the way I’d won?

“H-How do I know you aren’t tricking me?” I stammered. “No one can agree on whether your kind are divine or monsters.”

“Be still. The malevolence on this floor has been vanquished. Take the magic gem within this room and the labyrinth will be no more, but it is your decision to make. It is your right as the victor.”

There was no getting around the fact that there was an *undead* dragon in

front of me, yet I noticed that the horrible stench of the labyrinth had disappeared. If I could trust this creature, maybe he would answer some of my questions.

“So, what *is* this place? What’s this labyrinth for? It can’t be normal to have a dragon sealed in your basement.”

“We dragons, the Eternal, undergo a cycle of death and rebirth once every millennium. However, seeking to prevent this, a deity of pure evil, the master of all demons, targeted my kind, and we were sealed in locations dense with magical energy. Thus was born this labyrinth.”

A “deity of evil” sounded like a bit much for one healer to handle. “Isn’t that the sort of thing a hero usually deals with?” I realized too late that being smarmy with a dragon probably wasn’t a wise idea.

“Alas, none came to our aid. By the Wicked One’s curse, we have been doomed to isolation and undeath.”

The pope had mentioned something about the hero losing his or her powers after a fight with demons. But wait, if I was here and the hero wasn’t, then... I had a bad feeling about this.

“Hold on, I’m just a healer. I’m not even a paladin.”

“A new hero shall be born in some forty years. Before that time, my brethren must be freed from our curse. I beseech thee.”

What the hell did he want me to do about any of it? Surely there was a limit to such insane expectations. What would happen if I just refused?

“So, putting a pin in that, what would happen if your brethren *weren’t* freed?”

“Darkness will claim the magical essence of these lands, thus strengthening the demons. The hero’s struggle against the new Demon Lord will only worsen.”

Yeah, okay, this was *way* above my pay grade. Go to another labyrinth and do this all over again? Nope. Nu-uh. Screw that.

“Um, sorry, but I’ve got my hands full just trying to survive right now. Your kind will need to find another savior, because I know my limits, and that’s *well* past them.”

The room rumbled as the dragon chuckled. “Not often does a weakling, as you so describe yourself, best a dragon. You intrigue me. I shall grant you my protection.”

Were the last few years of my life just a prologue? What was this, a video game? Seriously, this was all a bit much.

“No, thanks; you can keep it.”

“You are a strange human. What are you called? I would know the name of the one who triumphed over me.”

“Luciel. And I meant what I said. I don’t want whatever you’re selling. I’m just a local healer trying to make his way. The only people I can protect are myself and those I care about.” This world wasn’t mine to save. This wasn’t my story. Adventures were for heroes and altruists.

“You should know, my protection will make you stronger.”

Now he was speaking my language. “Perfect. I’ll take it. The only way I’m planning to kick the bucket is lying in bed, halfway senile.”

The beast guffawed. “You continue to fascinate me. Still, I pray that you find it within yourself to rescue my kin.”

“I can’t promise anything. I’m not the protagonist here. Honestly, I’m just kind of bumbling around. I’m not cut out for this.”

“I know. But time is running short. My remains will not decay just yet. What is left of me is yours, Luciel. Now go with my blessing.”

“I’ll gladly accept that.”

“The demons’ power grows. Lend your hand to those in need. Save all that you can.”

“I will. I’m going to survive.”

“I have fulfilled my promise,” it said gently. “Fjil...na... Farewell...”

The dragon faded away, freed from its seal to be reborn anew...I assumed. Along with the pieces of its body that were left behind, a pedestal suddenly appeared. Mounted on it was a massive gem.

“This must be it.”

It had to have been the core of the labyrinth that the pope had spoken of. Removing it would cause the dungeon to vanish, so I left it there for the moment. Of course, destroying the labyrinth was all well and good, but I didn’t want to stick around to see what would happen if I was still inside when it went.

I gathered up the dragon’s hoard of treasure. This room was apparently a one-way trip, so I was glad to have my magic bag to store everything in. And here I thought Monsieur Luck had abandoned me. I even found two more magic bags in a chest.

Once I’d cleared the room, I turned my attention back to the creature’s remains.

“I wonder what kind of dragon he was before becoming one of the undead.”

I stashed his scales (including the legendary inverted one), fangs, and bones (both normal and decaying) in my bag.

Just when I thought I’d gotten everything, a spear and necklace appeared in a flash of light. When I held the spear, it felt as if it were part of some larger whole, from a body of some kind, and in the necklace was embedded an azure sphere. It was also dotted with several other holes that seemed made to hold additional spheres.

Finally, a magic circle glowed brightly in the center of the room.

“I don’t like the implications of this necklace. Things have gone way off the deep end for just one healer, but at least I get to go home now, I guess.”

How much of this was safe to tell anyone other than the pope? Probably not a lot. How nice and easy would it have been if this labyrinth had been a training illusion, as I’d originally hoped?

I braced myself then stepped into the glowing circle. It shone brighter. Then a *ping* sounded in my head.

Title Obtained: Blessing of the Divine Healer

Title Obtained: Protection of the Holy Dragon

Title Obtained: Dragonslayer

Title Obtained: He Who Released the Seal

An oath has been made. The locations of the imprisoned dragons are now known to you.

When the light faded, I found myself standing at the entrance to the labyrinth.

“I feel like I just got played. Not very holy of the Holy Dragon, if you ask me.” My stomach growled. “Oh, yeah, I forgot that I haven’t eaten in, like, half a day. Whatever, I’m too hungry to be mad. I’m leaving.”

My long, long journey had finally come to an end. For the first time in months, I emerged from the labyrinth.

Crisis at the Church — Saint Weirdo Gone Missing

The Adventurer's Guild of the Holy City was abuzz with talk of Luciel, also known as "Saint Weirdo," the only healer known to place compassion above profit.

It had been half a year since his last visit to the guildhall. Many adventurers had heard him say that he would be gone for some time, and had even seen him stockpile huge amounts of food and Substance X, but he had seemingly vanished without a trace.

At first, they'd thought he had simply gone on a trip, but no one could verify his destination. It wasn't plausible that a healer of his status would end up somewhere without an Adventurer's Guild when just about every town on the map had one. And there would have been evidence of him ordering Substance X wherever he was staying.

Substance X was positively vile and no one in their right mind would drink the stuff. So Adventurer's Guild Headquarters gave out incentives every year, rewards that came straight from the inheritance of a long-deceased sage and their HQ's old guildmaster, to the guild that consumed the most. These rankings were visible at all guild branches. The numbers were tracked by some absurdly advanced mechanism that discounted any substance that was tossed out, to prevent cheating. Not many even had the courage to try to subvert the system, though, with the rumor going around that if you wasted any, it would somehow find its way into your mouth again.

There hadn't been a single person who regularly drank Substance X in years until a certain someone had started guzzling it over at the Merratoni branch. Likewise, when Luciel transferred to the capital, the local guild's consumption had spiked. So wherever he was, he should have been easy to track. There was no question that he was still in the Holy City, and yet he was nowhere to be found.

Normally, this wouldn't have been cause for alarm, but without the Saint around to help counter the price gouging, clinics had started to get ballsy and inflate their prices further. Petitions were sent to the Church, but not one was

addressed.

One thing led to another until someone said, “What if the Church has him locked up?”

Then theories began to spread like wildfire.

“What if they’re torturing him?”

“He’s being brainwashed!”

“Maybe all they’re feedin’ him is Substance X.”

“What if they killed him?”

The unrest quickly spread from the adventurers to the city folk. Distrust of the Church swelled, and a movement to save Saint Weirdo soon began.

Meanwhile, at the Church, some were growing worried about Luciel’s prolonged stay in the labyrinth. His close friends knew that it was common for him to be absent for a month or so at a time and believed that he would return before long. But a month came and went, and then another, and another, and Luciel still had not emerged.

The pope herself—his direct superior—along with Cattleya, formerly known as Lady Catherine Frena, captain of the knights, attempted to rally a rescue unit. Unsurprisingly, the movement was rejected. The Church could not expend its limited resources on the recovery of a single healer lost in a fifty-year-old labyrinth.

Luciel’s peers denounced his reckless behavior, his arrogance in thinking that he could conquer the labyrinth himself. Only through the efforts of Her Holiness, Cattleya, and the Valkyries was official condemnation avoided and his name protected. In exchange, any formal plans for rescue were abandoned.

After half a year had passed since Luciel’s disappearance, adventurers were demanding answers regarding his well-being, which the Church declined to comment on. The truth of the labyrinth had to remain hidden, even at the cost of concealing the young man’s fate. Had the Church declared him dead, the

people would demand a body. Riots would follow.

While all this was happening, the only knight unit concerned with the healer's whereabouts—the Valkyries—was moving to begin its search. Along with his unconsenting predecessor, Jord, they set out for the labyrinth. Their combined strength was formidable, and the regiment made quick work of the hordes of skeletons and zombies in the tenth-floor boss room.

At the same time, Luciel was locked in the climax of his battle with the lich knight. What neither party knew was that the boss doors were interlocked. As long as someone was in a boss room on a higher floor, the doors to a lower-level floor would not budge.

The Valkyries had just finished gathering up their magic stones as Luciel begrudgingly trudged down to the forty-first floor. The rescue unit pressed on behind him, and the stench grew thicker. They barely made it past the thirtieth floor when the wraiths' dark magic began to take its toll. Unable to withstand their frenzied and mind-warped attacks on each other, the Valkyries were forced to retreat.

Lumina and her unit emerged and were reporting to Cattleya when tensions finally exploded. Church Headquarters had been surrounded, and leading a group of Merratoni adventurers was their guildmaster, Brod.

Grantz and his band of adventurers had joined them, along with people from all walks of life who felt indebted to the young healer. Together, they rallied under the cry, "Free Saint Weirdo! End the greed!" And their numbers only grew.

The Church had never faced such a crisis before, such a fervent demonstration of epic proportions. The protest was one step away from becoming a full-blown riot. Their one hundred and eighty lethargic knights trembled in fear at the hundreds of battle-hardened adventurers and thousands of enraged citizens at their gates. At any moment, the fuse could be lit.

Luciel, none the wiser, was slowly bringing his arduous journey to an end. Little did he know that upon his return to the surface, he would find himself closer to death than he had ever been while down in the labyrinth.

09 — A Zombie and His Master

With immense effort, I held in a victory cry as I stepped out of the labyrinth and went to open the door to Cattleya's shop. It was only thanks to my sharpened senses after months upon months down below that I managed to dodge the streak of silver that instantly came flying towards my neck. Sensing that my assailant wasn't going to let up after a single attempt, I summoned a shield just in time to block another attack. I peered around the side and saw Cattleya standing there, eyes wide and mouth agape.

"Was that second one necessary?" I complained just before something forced me suddenly backwards, sending me tumbling down the stairs.

My brain seemed to rattle around in my skull. A quick casting of Heal soon fixed the pounding in my head.

"What did I do to deserve that?!"

I stumbled back to my feet as Cattleya dove towards me. I braced myself for pain, but it never came. Instead, she threw her arms around my neck and embraced me.

"What in the world's gotten into you? Hey, I'm talking to you!"

It was kind of hard to be happy about a hug from someone who'd just tried to kill me. My heart was pounding a mile a minute and it was *not* out of love or excitement. It felt a bit like when the zombies would gnaw on me back in the first boss room.

"You're alive," she said.

Yeah, sure, she could smile all she wanted, but I was not about to be gaslit... Wait, "I'm alive"? When had I died?

"Yeah, I sure am. Just barely, though. The fortieth floor was rough. It took me about half a year to beat the main chamber, I think. I tried to come back right after that, but things got complicated, and I had to keep going."

"I'm so glad you're safe. But now's not the time. We need to hurry to... No, before that, you need to go out there and stop those adventurers." She was

practically a whirlwind of panic.

“Can you maybe slow down and explain what’s going on, please?”

Cattleya granted neither of my requests and all but threw me into the elevator. I stopped trying to keep up with it all and thought about how I’d kill for a tasty meal right about now as she dragged me all the way to the reception desk.

Familiar faces were awaiting me there.

“Master?! Gulgar, Galba!” I shouted. “What is everyone doing here? You too, Grantz? Did something happen? Whatever it is, I’ll help with anything I can.”

Silence greeted me.

“Um, hello?”

A very awkward silence.

Then everyone rushed forward and started pounding me on the back.



“Well, he looks pretty damn alive to me,” Brod grunted.

“Look at ‘im! Still got his head on his shoulders!”

Galba laughed. “Just what have you been *doing* all this time?”

So, clearly, they’d thought I had gone and died. I hadn’t meant to stay in the labyrinth for so long, but now I felt bad about worrying everyone. Cattleya’s reaction was starting to feel more justifiable. I *had* told her that I might stay down there a bit longer than usual, but no one in their right mind would have described my little sojourn as “a bit longer.” She deserved an apology from me later.

Grantz headed for the entrance then turned around. “Hey, Whirlwind, I’m fillin’ in the folks outside on the news. And you, Saint Weirdo, I’d better see your mug back at the guildhall before long.”

“Um, yeah. Right,” I replied absentmindedly as the local guildmaster departed. “So, I’m sorry for worrying you all, but what is everyone doing here?”

Brod sighed. “For the love of...”

“Give ‘im a break. You know Luciel’s got a few screws loose,” Gulgar cut in.

“Care to fill us in on what you’ve been up to?” Galba asked with a smile.

Before I could reply, an uproarious cheer erupted from outside.

“Is there a festival going on today?”

The three of them plus Cattleya (er, even the receptionists?) seemed to collectively die inside. I elected to strategically ignore this. Anyway, the labyrinth was obviously still a secret.

“There’s a training facility for healers here. Something went wrong while I was inside, and I got stuck in there for ages.”

Brod smacked my head without warning.

“Ow! Man, you’re still too quick for me to keep up with. What did I even spend these two years training for?” My eyes started to burn.

“Didn’t I tell you? You might be my apprentice, but you don’t have shit for talent. Come back in a hundred years and maybe we’ll talk,” he huffed. “Got

some nerve makin' me worry my ass off." Someone was in a good mood.

"A *hundred years*?!" My rumbling stomach abruptly interjected. "Say, Gulgar, I'm starving to death over here. I could really go for some of your cooking."

The wolf-man bellowed with laughter. "You got it, pal! Whaddya say we get you to the Adventurer's Guild and I'll whip up somethin' nice? Hey, lady, we're borrowin' your healer for a bit!"

"We'll need him to report back, but...I suppose that's for the best," the receptionist replied.

"Yeah, this gal gets it!"

"Cattleya, could you let the pope know I made it out? And tell her I have something she needs to hear." I could hardly report on the labyrinth with all these people around.

She nodded. "Will do."

A moment later, I found myself staring at the ceiling.

"Let's get outta here, boys!"

"Master! Let go of my neck! And Gulgar, why are you grabbing my legs?! Not you too, Galba! Please, they're going to start spreading rumors again! Anything but that!"

"Don't be such a baby, *Saint Sir Weirdo*." Brod stifled a guffaw.

Gulgar, however, cackled unreservedly. "Hold on tight, Weirdo!"

"Now, now, don't struggle. Just relax. You'll have your new nickname soon, I'm sure."

"Let me *gooooo*!"

And off we went. They paraded me around the Holy City like I was a human palanquin all the way to the guildhall.

*

Cattleya relayed the news of Luciel's return to the pope and the Church's various high-ranking officials. Even the young healer's critics seemed relieved to hear that he was alive. The knights were strong, but so were the hordes of

adventurers who had been one step away from laying siege to the castle, and few priests or bishops were familiar with the battlefield. Genuine fear had been rampant in the castle halls of late, and the sheer strength of Luciel's influence could not be denied. Those who felt the reverberations of the young healer's actions began to plot ways to earn his trust, how to stay on his good side, or, at the very least, how to stay far, far away from him.

*

Not long after I gorged myself on a delicious meal (a Gulgar and Grantz collaborative work), Substance X was brought out, and I was predictably forced to drink it.

The guildhall was filled with adventurers who couldn't go to a clinic for one reason or another—financial, racial, or otherwise—so I reinstated Saint Weirdo's Day. Despite the fact that I was so full it almost hurt, helping others beat fighting the undead any day.

After my work was done, I asked my master for a sparring match. This time, I was sure that I would land a hit with the techniques that I'd learned from my late "second master."

"I let my guard down earlier, but I was serious about having been training for two years. I'm not going to hold back!"

"Sounds to me like all you trained in was how to talk out your ass. Who the hell taught you how to hold a sword and spear like that?"

"Let's save it for the match, shall we?"

"All right, bring it!"

I leaped towards him, charging my body with magical energy, swiped my blade upwards and thrust out my spear.

And then I was on the floor.

Wait, *on the floor?*

"You're gettin' there, I'll give you that, but if you think you're some hotshot then maybe I need to remind you where you stand."

"Sorry. You're probably right."

“Stand up. We’re gonna set you straight.”

“Yes, sir!”

No one said it out loud, but I later heard what the adventurers around us were thinking as they watched me pick myself back up, over and over and over: the legend of Merratoni—the Masochist Healer—was no tall tale.

The adventurers knew who Brod was (the legendary Whirlwind, former S-ranker), and the way I dragged my exhausted body up and threw myself against him with wild abandon was akin to the way a zombie single-mindedly pursued living flesh.

And so was born yet another nickname: the Living Zombie. But it would still be some time before I learned about that.

“You planning on takin’ a nap? Get up before I tear that arm off.”

“I’m ready...for anything!” I wheezed between grunts of pain.

“Oh, a tough guy, huh? I’m impressed you can still talk all that shit. All right, the gloves are comin’ off!”

“Gaaaaah!”

It would not have surprised me if Brod could have single-handedly taken on the entirety of the Church’s fighting force. In a strange way, it was like I was back at the Merratoni Adventurer’s Guild. I felt at home and sincerely happy that there were people around who cared about me.

10 — Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction

Festivities had continued into the night, and now the adventurers were preparing to leave for Merratoni with almost militaristic discipline. They offered me kind words as I wavered between gratitude and guilt.

“Anything happens and we’ll come runnin’ again!”

“We’re glad you’re still kicking.”

“We masochists are having a get-together sometime. You should join.”

“You’re the only way Brod can work out all that stress, y’know.”

“You’ve inspired me to never give up. I’m gonna keep apologizing to my wife for cheating on her till she takes me back!”

“Real adventurers repay their debts.”

“See ya next time I need healin’!”

“You’re not the only one who’s gonna be gettin’ stronger. Next time you’re in Merratoni, we gotta have a match!”

Whoa, back up, a couple of those were... Never mind.

I wanted to talk with everyone, but there were just too many people there, and they’d told me not to sweat about chatting with each of them. Soon, they had all left for Merratoni, leaving me, Brod, Gulgar, and Galba to say our more private goodbyes.

“You see all those people you worried, you moron? You’re weak, and you’d better not forget that again after I put you through the wringer yesterday. And no slacking off, got that?”

“Message received.”

“Aw, give it a rest, Brod,” Gulgar said. “We still want ’im to come back, don’t we?”

Brod grunted and glared at me.

“I’m coming back, okay? I promise. Now stop looking at me like that.”

“How would you like to train with me next time you visit? I think you’ll find my style of fighting more suited to ‘modest’ people like you.”

“Hands off my apprentice, Galba.”

“Why don’t we let Luciel decide?” he chuckled. I felt so blessed to know all these kind people.

“Anyway, make sure you bring a girl with you when you come back,” said Brod.

“A girl? Oh, that reminds me, could you pass these letters along to Nanaella and Monica?”

“What am I, a delivery boy? Hm, figures it’s those two. They were about ready to drop everything and haul ass to get here until we convinced ‘em they’d be no help in a fight.” The guildmaster wore a highly suggestive smirk. It reminded me that I must have scared them, though. Next time I had a break, I needed to go and apologize in person.

“I think you mean until I convinced them,” Galba pointed out. “And tell me, who was it who ditched their guildmaster duties to ‘haul ass’ again?”

“Gimme a break; I’ll work when we get back. But forget all that... Who are you sweet on, Luciel? Doesn’t make any difference to me. I’m gonna train your kids right, just you wait.”

Never mind how busy I was, the effects of Substance X didn’t leave me much room for considering a family. Was a peaceful life too much to ask for?

“You’re getting way ahead of yourself,” I said. “Sure, I owe a lot of where I’m at now to their letters, but I’ve still got plenty of work to do.”

“I swear, you have no tact. Luciel and those girls are in a very delicate balance, and you can’t go prodding their feelings or you might spoil things. Honestly, they’re just kids. Be more careful,” Galba berated the guildmaster.

“Oh, uh... Sorry.”

The atmosphere quickly grew awkward. “No, it’s okay.”

“Maybe if you pop out a daughter I’ll teach ‘er how to cook!” Gulgar cut in, lightening the mood again.

“Don’t encourage him. Anyway, come back to Merratoni if the Church is too much for you. You’ll always have a safe place to stay there.”

“Thank you. As soon as I’m allowed to travel more, I promise I’ll stop by. And there’s something else...” It was probably safe to tell them.

“Whatcha beatin’ around the bush for?” Gulgar asked. “Since when does a guy like you clam up?”

He had a point. A “guy like me” didn’t have many moving parts to him. I’d studied a little, but my experiences in this world consisted of little more than magic and combat training.

“What’s the matter, Luciel?”

“Something on your mind?”

I could trust them, and they trusted me. They deserved to hear the warning that the Holy Dragon had delivered.

“The demons are on the move. Their god is going to make them stronger, and a hero won’t be born for several more decades. I just want you all to be careful.”

“Oh, yeah? The Church is quick on the uptake,” Brod remarked.

“Leave it to them to match my sleuthing,” Galba added.

“You don’t have time to be worrying about us. You watch yourself and let us know if anything happens from now on. Don’t make us cross the country to find out.”

“Right, thanks.”

I knew these three weren’t ordinary, but they exceeded virtually all physical limitations. My path to one day rivaling them was a long one.

“You got nothin’ to worry about. We’ll make the Church hand you over if we need the help.”

“That sounds like something I should worry about.”

They believed me without question, and still my well-being was more concerning to them than anything else. I was outclassed, and no amount of

training was going to change that.

After we said goodbye, I returned to Headquarters.

I was heading for the elevator when a receptionist stopped me.

“Mister Luciel, a moment, please.”

“What is it?” It wasn’t common for the receptionists to actively call out to someone.

“Miss Cattleya asked us to inform you that she would like to see you when you returned.”

And how was I supposed to know where she was at that very moment?

“Where does she want me to meet her? Was that all she said?”

“Oh, one moment and I’ll contact her.” The receptionist pulled out the crystal ball I had seen the day I’d arrived and closed her eyes.

I was practically dead on my feet. An all-nighter after a mentally exhausting encounter with a dragon and a match with Brod was awfully close to the limit of the beatings a single person could take. I was more than a decade younger than when I’d died, but even youngsters had to sleep at *some* point.

A certain dashing countenance caught my eye as a yawn escaped me.

“Luciel! You’re alive.”

Lumina’s sudden appearance instantly eliminated my drowsiness. Why did she always catch me in the middle of doing something stupid?

“I wish there was time to talk,” she continued, “but Her Holiness is waiting.”

“Right.”

We stepped into the elevator together and went straight up to the pope’s chambers.

“Thank you for your letter,” I offered as the elevator climbed. “I couldn’t have made it out alive without that holding me together. Really. Thank you.”

“I am grateful to see you unharmed, Luciel.”

It felt like it had been ages since we'd last met. Months ago, before the labyrinth had trapped me, Lumina had sent me a letter. At first, my gut had told me that it was a love letter, but my baseless expectations were quickly doused. All it had been was a list of points of improvement for my combat techniques, along with miscellaneous common-sense recommendations to help with my chronic "ignorance."

Nanaella and Monica's letters were wholesome in comparison, filled with words of encouragement and brimming with declarations of their new goals. It was thanks to all three of those letters that I had pulled myself back from the brink of death so many times while facing the lich knight.

Lumina and I traded meaningless banter until we finally reached our destination. She knocked on the door.

"Lumina, captain of the Valkyries, has brought with her Luciel, the exorcist, Your Holiness."

"You may enter," a voice replied. It belonged to Cattleya.

The door opened, and we proceeded to the center of the room where we knelt (a routine I was well-accustomed to at this point).

"Exorcist Luciel. I see that you have returned to us alive and well," the pope remarked.

"I apologize for worrying everyone."

"I do not fault you. We would have mounted a large-scale rescue if not for the dissenters who outnumbered us. The Valkyries' attempts, you see, were cut short at the thirty-first floor, at the hands of the wraiths."

Not even the Valkyries stood a chance down there?

I noticed there were more people than usual in the room; faces I didn't recognize. Was this about the adventurers who had nearly stormed the castle?

"I know you did what you could."

"Your kindness brings me peace. But I must ask, what was it that kept you from returning these many months?"

"There was a monster in the main chamber of the fortieth floor. It was

massive, far larger than the average death knight, and neither cleansing nor healing magic would affect it. I didn't know what to do."

I went on to recount my arduous battle with the lich knight. When I'd finished, I cringed internally a bit for going rather overboard with my retelling of it. I'd forgotten that all these people were here to listen.

"How harrowing a plight it must have been. And this is what held you in the labyrinth for so long?"

"Yes. After I defeated the lich knight, I tried to leave, but the door wouldn't budge. All I could do was press forward."

"It did ultimately reopen, I take it, as you now stand here before us?"

"No, it didn't. I continued straight down to the fiftieth floor and conquered that final chamber. Only then was I finally offered a way back. I would feel comfortable relaying further details only to Lady Cattleya, Lady Lumina, and you, Your Holiness."

"I am astonished by your progress, Luciel. And so I feel I must honor your wishes. All but those the boy mentioned, leave at once."

I hadn't expected her to give in so easily. Her maidens quietly left the room along with the archbishops. Or maybe they were regular bishops? Whoever they were, soon only the four of us remained.

"There is a reason you had me send them away, I assume?" The pope was hidden as always, but the wariness in her tone was not similarly veiled.

"Let me start with what was in the fiftieth floor's main chamber. First of all, it was a wight, and a huge one at that. It was almost like an orc. And it seemed to *spawn* monsters from its body."

"Surely it did not spawn liches and the like."

"No, only death knights and wraiths. Once I defeated it with the Sanctuary Circle spell, I saw it turn into an old man, a priest of some sort, before he vanished."

"An elderly man? Do you have his belongings?"

"Right here. A staff and a grimoire." I called the items from my bag, and the

moment Cattleya and Lumina saw them, their eyes widened in shock.

“Cattleya.”

“At once.”

I handed her the items, and she took them to Her Holiness.

“I...” Her voice was distant, sad. “I am without words. Here you are, the lord of a labyrinth.”

They had known each other. She had known *all of them*. I heaved.

“Luciel, are you all right?” Lumina placed a hand on my back.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry, it’s just that I’d thought the labyrinth was only an illusion for the longest time.”

“The undead you fought weren’t real people, Luciel. They were memories from the labyrinth itself,” Cattleya explained. She was probably right, but the question of who this man had once been still remained.

“I’d heard that only healers were sent there, and the zombies all moved so slowly. I thought it was to help newcomers get used to fighting monsters.”

“Why in the name of all that is holy did you lend credence to such an idea?” the pope asked.

“Because I never leveled up.”

“You never... That may be so, but I assure you the labyrinth was all too real.”

“I only figured that out during my fight with the lich knight.”

“Then that is a feat. Never in all my years have I seen such incredible thickheadedness.” The pope didn’t sound amused, but at least I was done with that vile place now.

“Anyway, this is the crux of what I wanted to speak with you about, Your Holiness. After I conquered the fiftieth floor, a door appeared. It siphoned my magic away, and when it opened, I found the Holy Dragon inside, corrupted and undead.”

“A dragon? Did I hear you correctly?”

“It told me that its brethren were cursed by the Wicked One and sealed away in labyrinths. And that a new hero will only be born again in forty years or so.”

“Cattleya, Lumina, this knowledge is not to leave the chamber.”

They both voiced their understanding. This information about the hero was clearly more crucial than I’d thought.

“Now, elaborate on what this dragon conveyed to you.”

“Unless the imprisoned Eternal Dragons are freed, the essence of the world will fall to darkness and monsters will grow stronger. It said that if that happens, the hero may lose to the Demon Lord.”

“By the heavens, this is dire news indeed. Is that all it spoke of? Surely there is more.”

“It asked me to help in any way I could. But I’m certainly not strong enough to go labyrinth-hunting, so I intend to focus on protecting what I can.”

“With your increasing strength, I believe that to be a humble goal.”

“Not at all. I’m always lucking out and barely making it by the skin of my teeth. If I hadn’t found a grimoire for Extra Heal on the thirty-ninth floor, I would have been torn to shreds long before I finished.”

I didn’t like placing a number on the times I’d been gored by a blade, but if I had to, it would probably have been in the triple digits.

“Your limbs are still intact,” Lumina observed.

“Exactly. Extra Heal can regenerate them.”

Lumina had once told me that there were those who called paladins “monsters,” but this new spell made me equally inhuman, in a way.

“Indeed it can,” the pope agreed. “However, I never believed such a grimoire still existed. Fortune favors you, Luciel.” I sensed a smile from her tone.

“And it was thanks to the spellbook that the lord of the fortieth floor dropped that I was able to use the Sanctuary Circle Spell to make it through the final chamber and free the dragon.”

“These accomplishments warrant a reward, yet I know not what gifts would

be befitting of such a victory.”

Well, that came out of nowhere. There really wasn’t anything I wanted aside from the freedom to leave Headquarters.

“About that forbidden grimoire, I intend to keep it safe inside my magic bag, where it will never reach anyone else’s hands. The risks of using a spell like Revive are too great to offer freely.”

“I must reiterate that no one is to repeat this information to anyone beyond these walls.”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” Lumina and Cattleya replied.

“Luciel, present to me all that you obtained from the fortieth and fiftieth floors, including the dragon’s lair. Your spoils are yours, but we must inspect them for any significance that may be pertinent to our interests.”

“Understood.”

I took out everything I had picked up during my extended stay. The pope asked to keep the giant greatsword and spear that the lich knight had left behind, as well as the final wight’s staff. All of my grimoires aside from Revive were to be left with her for copying and reproduction. Additional equipment and items dropped by the dragon could only be used by me. Lastly, I didn’t have much use for spare magic bags, but the ones found in labyrinths apparently went for about a platinum each. What I wouldn’t have given for an appraisal skill...

There was one last thing still nagging at me.

“Your Holiness, why have I not leveled up yet?”

“It may benefit you to view your skills and attributes once more.”

“Okay, let’s see. *Status open.*”

A hologram opened before me.

Name: Luciel

Job: Healer VIII — Holy Dragoon I

Age: 19

Level: 1

HP: 840 — MP: 580

STR: 152 — VIT: 163

DEX: 137 — AGI: 139

INT: 168 — MGI: 182

RMG: 174 — SP: 0

Magic Affinity: Holy

SKILLS

Assess Mastery I — Monster Luck I — Martial Arts VI Magic Handling IX —
Magic Control IX — Holy Magic IX

Meditation VII — Focus VIII — Life Recovery VII

Magic Recovery VIII — Strength Recovery VII — Throwing V

Butchery II — Detect Danger VI — Ambulation VI

Physical Enhancement IV — Parallel Thinking IV — Short Cast V

Null Cast III — Free Casting I — Magic Circle Casting III Swordsmanship IV —
Shields III — Spears IV

Archery I — Perception V — Sword-and-Spear III

Trap Sensing II — Trap Detection I — Cartography III Magic Amplification III —
Accelerated Thought II

HP Growth Rate Up VIII — MP Growth Rate Up VIII

STR Growth Rate Up VIII — VIT Growth Rate Up VIII DEX Growth Rate Up VIII
— AGI Growth Rate Up VIII INT Growth Rate Up VIII — MGI Growth Rate Up VIII
RMG Growth Rate Up VIII — Physical Attribute Growth Rate Up I

Poison Resist VIII — Paralysis Resist VIII — Petrify Resist VIII Sleep Resist VIII

— Charm Resist V — Curse Resist VIII Enfeeble Resist VIII — Silence Resist VIII —
Disease Resist VIII Shock Resist VI — Bewitchment Resist VI — Spiritual Resist IX
Slash Resist VI — Stab Resist VI

TITLES

Shaper of Destiny (all stats +10)

Protection of the God of Fate (increased SP)

Blessing of the Divine Healer (holy healing magic efficacy +50%) Protection of
the Holy Dragon (confers the holy dragoon class, increased combat abilities and
attributes, and the ability to speak with dragons) Dragonslayer (increased
strength and defensive abilities versus dragons) He Who Released the Seal
(impervious to the Wicked One's curse and chosen one of the sealed dragons'
powers)

Adventurer's Guild — Rank E | Healer's Guild — Rank A

"See? I'm still at level one." Putting aside how far my Spiritual Resist skill had
grown above the others...

"Do you not see additions to your jobs? Your attributes? These are not the
abilities of someone who is level one."

"True, my growth has been a little crazy, but then that's even more confusing.
Why haven't I leveled up?"

My stats were high, but Brod could still swat me like a fly, so there was no
way I was all that strong. And now, with this second job, I was suddenly multi-
classing, meaning that increasing my job level was going to be a problem. What
did all this mean for me?

"Cattleya, show him."

Cattleya took an aged book from Her Holiness and brought it over to me.

"What is it?"

“It is the original manuscript for God’s Lament, or rather what you know as ‘Substance X.’ Read it.”

There was even more about that stuff? I scanned through notes and theories pursuing various posited effects and potentialities until my eyes stopped on the most shocking discovery. According to one study, raising one’s level was tremendously difficult while the substance was being consumed. The author ended the document with the wish that willing participants might one day allow them to research the long-term effects that were as of yet a mystery.

“Um, wow,” I said hesitantly. “I’m kind of at a loss for words.”

The truth behind my stagnant level disturbed me far more than when I’d realized the labyrinth was real. It shook me, but I knew that Brod and the others couldn’t have been aware of any of this when they had given me that first mug. I couldn’t blame them. More importantly, there was a new question.

Do I keep drinking it? Do I give up something so OP for the sake of traditional leveling?

“Luciel, get a hold of yourself.”

“You are alive, Luciel. You’re still with us.”

Cattleya and Lumina’s concern brought me back.

“Sorry, I was just feeling conflicted about whether I should focus on leveling up or not.”

“I think that would be wise. It will make you far stronger far more quickly,” Lumina said.

I understood her point, but I needed to ask my master his thoughts as well.

The pope turned her attention to the dragon’s corrupted bones. “Returning to the items you’ve brought back, might I request these once-undead bones?”

“I think I’m the only one who can use the pure, holy ones, but the others are yours. Please keep it between the Valkyries and yourself, though, Your Holiness.”

“I shall. In one week’s time, we will celebrate the labyrinth’s vanquishment in your honor. I do hope you will attend.”

“I’d love to.”

“Cattleya, Lumina, remain here. There is much to discuss.”

“Yes, Your Holiness,” they replied.

“Luciel, you may rest. It gladdens me to see you among us once more.”

“Thank you.”

I trudged on weary, sleep-deprived legs back to my room, my thoughts in chaos. Normally, I’d be too pumped full of adrenaline to sleep despite my exhaustion, but my savior, the Angel’s Pillow, carried me off into long-awaited slumber.

11 — The Healer's Proclamation

Do you know what it's like to be commended for something? Do you know what it's like to be commended amid strangers who detest you? Do you know what it's like to feel their pressure and hear their vitriol? To be elevated above those years your senior?

I'd had to give speeches at promotions in my past life too. First, you thank your superiors, then you go on about how you couldn't have made it that far without the support of your peers, yada yada. Next, you throw in a bit of self-deprecating humor about your struggles up to that point or how hard you worked to get there. Then you finish it off by stating your next goal and conclude with another thank-you.

For starters, there was my former superior, Granhart, who interrogated me and presented me with my card and robe. Then there was Jord, who showed me how to fight monsters with cleansing magic but wasn't much help with the first boss, so no extra points there. Lumina's Valkyries allowed me to train with them but honestly not much else. So it might sound a little harsh, but my thanks went primarily to Cattleya for her advice, and to the dining hall lady for cooking my food.

But who could forget Her Holiness's amazing equipment? Specifically, the magic bag and Angel's Pillow. Without those two, I wouldn't have made it very far. And, of course, I couldn't possibly leave out Substance X and Monsieur Luck.

All I'd ever wanted back on Earth was that promotion, and it had landed me here, in another world. But I could live with that. What I didn't understand was why all my efforts to improve myself, to avoid life-or-death situations, continually forced me into fighting.

I acted only for myself. I buddied up with the strong to keep from dying. I only got close with people to stay alive, played the polite businessman to survive. But at some point, it had stopped being about me. At some point, I'd spent so much time with people that I'd come to respect, people like Brod, Gulgar, and the others, that I'd started to feel something else.

I felt content.

But the god of fate chose to punish me for my selfishness. He threw me into a den of enemies as recompense for my egocentric efforts to secure a safe life. So, I'd stopped working for my own benefit. Or at least that had been my goal. I'd delved into my work in the labyrinth, and healed at the Adventurer's Guild, and some people even came to admire me. But being kind wasn't indicative of a selfless character. That one fact never changed, no matter which world you found yourself in.

I healed those who couldn't afford it, called it "charity," and believed that my kindness was for something greater than myself. It took me a while to reach this point, but I poured everything I had into my work. So why, great goddess Crya, was *this* where I worked? Why was I now standing here facing more enemies than ever before?

The celebration ceremony for the conquest of the labyrinth was being held in a large training ground utilized by the knights. And here today were not only those knights but an array of healers and important dignitaries as well. The anxiety of it all gave me an awful stomachache.

Even the pope was in attendance on this happy occasion, although a thick veil concealed her face. A magic speaker-like device amplified her voice through an arclink crystal.

"At last, the labyrinth that has troubled us these many decades is no more, due to the efforts of one brave exorcist by the name of Luciel. Though its essence yet lingers and beasts will continue to emerge for some time, its end is now in sight. Unified regiments shall be assigned the task of periodic exterminations. As such, I pray that each and every one of you will see to it that your diligence in training does not wane."

She paused for a moment, then continued. "Now, in recognition of his grand deeds, I hereby confer upon Luciel the rank of S and equal standing, including commanding authority, with the title of bishop. Furthermore, I grant him the right to refuse any and all orders that are not directly my own. This I, Pope Fluna Alludelli de Shurule, do decree. We would hear from you now, S-rank Luciel."

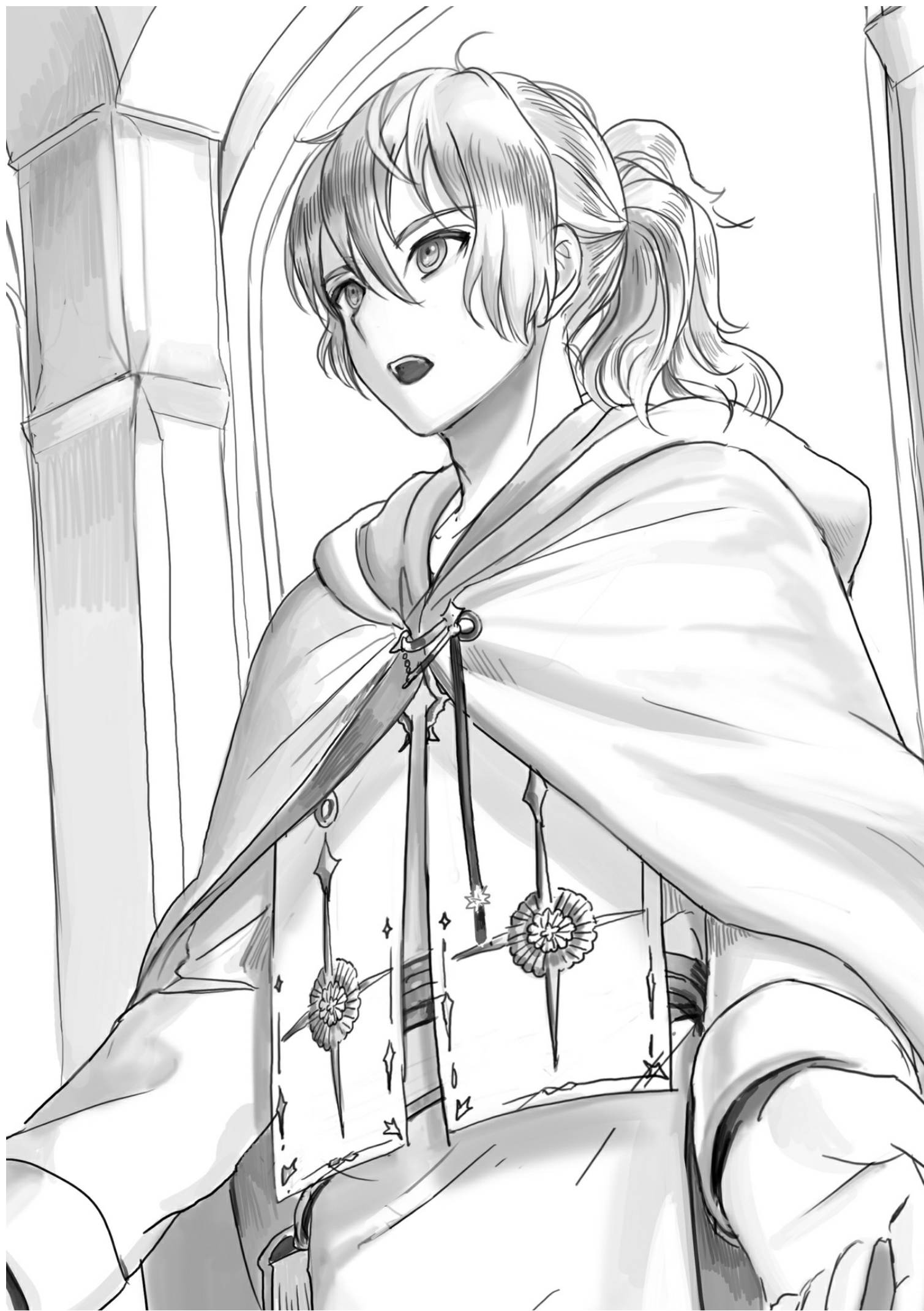
She was staring at me with a gaze that I couldn't see yet somehow knew was filled with expectations. Boy, this stomachache sure wasn't getting any better. If only I could ditch the speech and take an airship to a world in the sky where people wouldn't try to assassinate me. Too bad such things didn't exist here.

They had given me a podium at which to speak, and there was only one thing that had to be said clearly: I needed to condemn the Church. Only Her Holiness, Cattleya, and the Valkyries knew what was about to happen.

Come on, Monsieur Luck, I just wanted a peaceful life, for crying out loud!

"Thank you for the introduction and the honor, Your Holiness. I am Luciel, newly promoted S-rank healer and exorcist. I know that many of you don't take kindly to a newcomer like me being given so much authority after a single accomplishment, and I don't blame you. However, I'm sorry to say that this no-good upstart is about to make things even more uncomfortable. You see, the Church's influence is on the cusp of collapse, as it has been for the duration of my four years as a healer."

The crowd stirred, and I sensed tempers rising. The Valkyries and Cattleya, and even the pope, I could only assume, stifled grins as if this wasn't all their idea. To be fair, I was kind of getting into it.



“The reason for this lies, firstly, in the policies of pompous healers. It’s said that the first healers of the guild offered their services in exchange for a variety of things, not just money. And when I heard that, I was in awe of the saintliness of our founders. But such a system is not monetarily viable as an occupation, and there will inevitably be unreasonable patients on top of that. It simply isn’t fair work. In this respect, we are in agreement.

“I do not believe the problem lies in being compensated with money. Many of you, and many healers across the world, hold our work in high regard and heal with pride, so why is this occupation so often associated with greed? Because there are no regulations. Too many clinics have made profit their driving force, and that is why I, with the support of Her Holiness and the ten archbishops, am declaring the creation of guidelines for the costs of healing.

“Furthermore, all paladins and templars found guilty of corruption after sufficient investigation will now be relieved of their positions and de-classed to ‘knight’ for crimes against Crya the Divine. No longer will misdeeds in the Church’s name be abided.

“I hope you’ll all join me in these efforts to restore the reputation of this nation’s seat of leadership. With you as my witnesses, I vow to dedicate my life to that goal. Thank you for your courteous attention.”

“Indeed, it shall be so,” Her Holiness said. “However, I have one more proclamation to make on this day. I hereby order Cattleya to be relieved of her duty, and reinstated as Lady Catherine Frena, Captain of the Guard.”

Cattleya’s—or rather Catherine’s—return to duty had infinitely more of an impact on the crowd than my own speech. The clamor seemed unending until the pope continued and the voices quieted.

“The captain’s work is done. The rampant injustices and festering wounds that have plagued these halls have been cleansed, and thus she shall return. If ever you notice the absence of an individual you know, be aware that they were likely a victim of justice, and that the scope of these inspections shall be broadened. Lend me your support and let us rally as one. In the name of our Church, I implore each and every one of you to join us in our efforts.”

The pope did not need to bow or make pleas, but as her humble request

came through the speakers with none of the weight of her position, everyone in attendance saluted at once.

I was now an S-rank healer, stuck in the heart of the lion's den, but the process of betterment for the Church had begun. To Crya, to the god of fate, to the Divine Healer, and to my ancestors watching over me, I offered a prayer for the future.

❖ Granhart

❖ Cattleya

❖ Jord

❖ Luciel

❖ Lumina





Bonus Short Story

The Valkyries

Among the Knights of Shurule, there was one regiment of paladins composed entirely of women. Strong, proud, and beautiful, this team was known as the Valkyries, and their leader, Lumina, was the strongest and proudest of them all. However, as the youngest to ever be given the honor of captaining, she wasn't without her worries.

"Deployed again, and only us," she mumbled to herself. "Maybe we went a little too far during our joint training."

Paladins and templars, each divided into four regiments, made up the Knights of Shurule. Templars were people from various jobs and classes who had sworn their loyalty to the Church, totaling about two hundred individuals. Comparatively, there were just fifty or so paladins, as only those who possessed the paladin class itself or had hopes of becoming one made up their ranks. At the bottom of the hierarchy, the Valkyries were the smallest paladin regiment, made up of eleven women, including Lumina.

All of the regiments from each knight division participated together in joint exercises, one of which was currently taking up space in Lumina's head. The nature of those exercises was never the same twice in a row and this one had been a battle royale. Naturally, everyone's attention had been focused on eliminating the smallest regiment first—the Valkyries—expecting little resistance.

On the contrary, the ladies had swept through the battlefield and demolished the competition. They had won without a single casualty and the knights' pride was hurt, so deployments and expedition duties were being dumped on the women without end.

"So petty. If only they were as modest as Luciel..."

"That's asking a little much," Lucy interjected, overhearing her.

“Quite. The boy takes our beatings yet somehow still treats us as *women*,” Elizabeth added.

“I didn’t realize you were listening.”

“It’s kind of hard not to when we’re all eating at the same table,” Marluka said. “But you seem tired. Don’t forget to take care of yourself, okay?”

“If you need a little Luciel spice in your life, want me to go grab him for you?” Gannet offered with a smirk.

Lumina tilted her head. “Luciel? Why? He’s currently in the labyrinth, so I doubt you’ll find him.”

“Er, forget it.” Gannet silently paid her respects to him.

“She’s being dim, right?” Queena whispered to Myla. “I don’t think she notices, but she totally needs some Luciel.”

“Yes,” the other replied, “Lady Lumina tends to be unaware of her own feelings.”

“I’ll get to work.”

“For Lady Lumina.”

“What if we set them up? That could be fun,” Kathy joined in.

“I’m not sure I like pairing her up with a guy like that, but if it’ll help...” Ripnear said.

“She needs this right now.”

“Well, I can’t deny that.”

Saran suddenly interrupted and blurted out, “Huh? You don’t got eyes for him, Lady Lumina? Sure coulda fooled me with how much you two look at each other.”

“Oh, I know, right? I think they’ve been like that ever since people started calling him ‘Saint Weirdo’ or something,” Beatrice added without a hint of shame. “You gonna eat that, Saran? Gimme.”

“It’s all yours.”

The girls' secret conversation went up in smoke. Everyone's eyes focused on Lumina, expressions blank and expectant. She was dumbfounded for a moment, but soon a slight smile spread across her face.

"Is that how we looked? I see. Yes, it's true that seeing Luciel's growth makes me happy, but I feel the same way about all of you. Oh, now I'm remembering his unfinished training. If only there were time for me to instruct him before our mission."

She sighed. Although the others felt there was *probably* a difference between her feelings for them versus her feelings for a man, they had never experienced romance themselves, so they could say nothing in return.

Sensing a drop in Lumina's spirits, Elizabeth wracked her brain and hatched an idea. "Why not write him a letter?"

"A letter?"

"Yes, that way you can tell him what needs to be said and teach him what he needs to know. I imagine he would write you a reply as well."

"A sound idea, but how would I deliver it to him?"

"It might get nabbed if you're not careful," Saran said.

"True." Elizabeth paused for a moment. "Do you two share any acquaintances you could entrust with it?"

"I believe I know someone. Thank you, Elizabeth."

"My pleasure."

"Now, what to write?"

As Lumina's thoughts turned, her beaming smile spread throughout the Valkyries until everyone shared it.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

Chapter 2: The Labyrinth and the Valkyries

[01 — The Price of a Healer](#)

[02 — An HQ Healer's Duties](#)

[03 — The Undead Labyrinth](#)

[04 — Crossed Wires](#)

[05 — Positive Mindsets for the Eternally Level One](#)

[06 — Conceit and the Boss Room Menace](#)

[07 — A Battle Decided, Papal Negotiations Underway](#)

[08 — Training With the Paladins](#)

[09 — Morning Drills with the Valkyries](#)

[10 — A Series of Unfortunate Nicknames](#)

[11 — The First Ride and the Anxiety Cure-All](#)

[12 — The Honorary Valkyrie](#)

[13 — Business Talks with the Pope](#)

[14 — Saint Weirdo is Born](#)

Chapter 3: A Stone Best Left Unturned

[01 — OP Equipment and a Full Stomach](#)

[Lumina — The Captain of the Valkyries](#)

[02 — Saint Weirdo's Day](#)

[03 — Bearing Fruit in the Third Boss Room](#)

[04 — Another Audience with the Pope](#)

[05 — Disaster in the Holy City](#)

[06 — Struggle Against the Newly-Dubbed Lich Knight](#)

[07 — Always Cheat on Time Trials](#)

[08 — The Labyrinth of Trials](#)

[Crisis at the Church — Saint Weirdo Gone Missing](#)

[09 — A Zombie and His Master](#)

[10 — Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction](#)

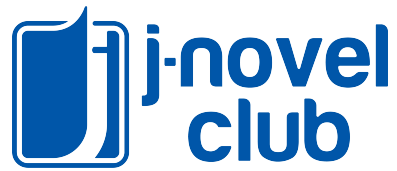
[11 — The Healer's Proclamation](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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The Great Cleric: Volume 2

by Broccoli Lion

Translated by Matthew Jackson Edited by Tess Nanavati

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